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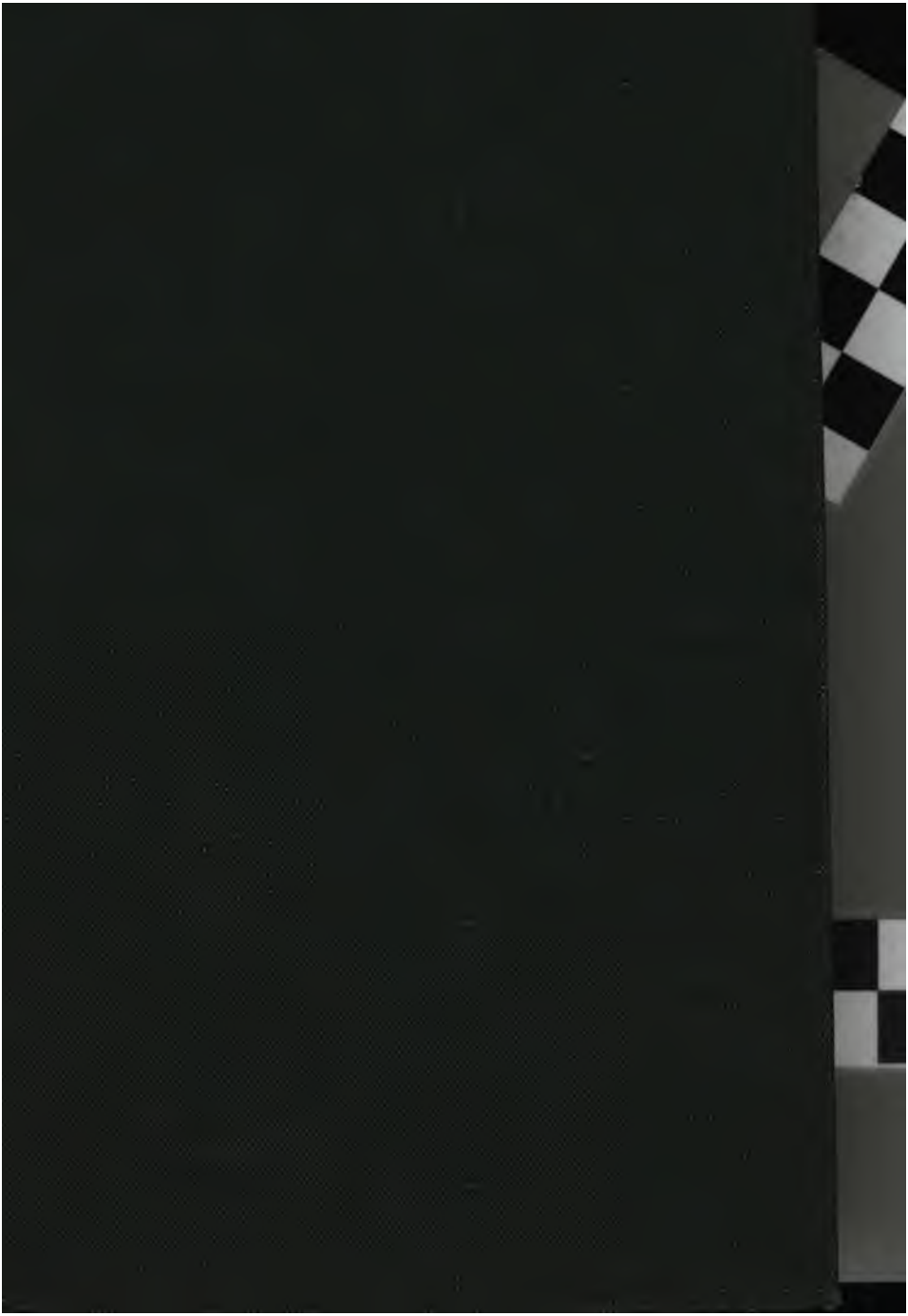

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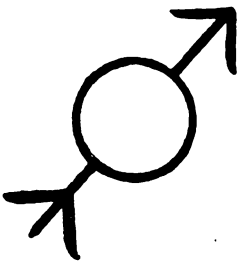

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TO

FRANK IVES SCUDAMORE

This Book

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WRECKED IN PORT.

CHAPTER I.

MORIBUND.

"I SAY! Old Ashurst's going to die."

"No! How do you know? Who told you?"

"I heard Dr. Osborne say so to Miss Winter."

"Ah! so likely Dr. Osborne would tell that old beast! Why, doctors are the silentest fellows in the world. My uncle Robert is a doctor, and I know all about it."

"Well, I'll take my dick I heard old Osborne say so! I say, Hawkes, if Ashurst does die, we shall break up at once, sha'n't we?"

"I should think so! Stunning!"

"And we sha'n't come back till there's a new head master?"

"Of course not, you young ass! That don't matter much to me; I'm going to leave this term."

"Don't I wish I was, that's all! I say, Hawkes, do you think the governors will give old Ashurst's place to Joyce?"

"Joyce?—that snob! Not they, indeed! They'll get a swell from Oxford, or somewhere, to be head master; and I should think he'll give Master Joyce the sack. Baker, lend me twopence!"

"No—I say, Hawkes, you owe me——"

"I know all about that, you young beggar—pay you on Saturday. Hand out now, or I'll fetch you a lick on the head."

Under the pressure of this awful threat, little Sam Baker produced the required sum from his trousers-pocket, and gave the coins to big Alfred Hawkes, who threw them into the air, caught them over-handed, and walked off, whistling. Little Sam Baker, left to himself, turned out the pocket of his trousers, which he had not yet explored, found a half-melted acidulated drop sticking in one corner, removed it, placed it in his mouth, and enjoyed it with great relish. This refection finished, he leaned his little arms over the park-paling of the cricket-field, where the above-described colloquy had taken place, and surveyed the landscape. Immediately beneath him was a large meadow, from which the hay had been just removed, and which, looking brown and bare and closely shorn as the chin of some retired Indian civilian, remained yet fragrant from its recent treasure. The meadow sloped down to a broad sluggishly-flowing stream, unnavigated and unnavigable, where the tall green flags, standing breast-high, bent and nodded gracefully, under the influence of the gentle summer breeze, to the broad-leaved water-lilies couchant below them. A notion of scuttling across the meadow and having "a bathe" in a sequestered part of the stream which he well knew, faded out of little Sam Baker's mind before it was half formed. Though a determined larker and leader in mischief among his coevals, he was too chivalrous to take advantage of the opportunity which their chief's illness gave him over his natural enemies, the masters. Their chief's illness! And little Sam Baker's eyes were lifted from the river and fixed themselves on a house about a quarter of a mile further on—a low-roofed, one-storeyed, red-brick house, with a thatched roof and little mullioned windows, from one of which a white blind was fluttering in the evening breeze. "That's his room," said little Sam Baker to himself. "Poor old Ashurst! He wasn't half a bad old chap; he often let me off a hundred lines he—poor old Ashurst!" And two large tears burst from the small boy's eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

The boy was right. Where the white blind fluttered was the dominie's bedroom, and there the dominie lay dying. A gaunt, square, ugly room with panelled walls, on which the paint had cracked and rubbed and blistered, with such furniture as it possessed old-fashioned, lumbering, and mean, with evidence of poverty everywhere—evidence of poverty which a woman's hand had evidently tried to screen and soften without much effect. The bed, its well-worn red-moreen curtains, with a dirty yellow border, having been tightly bound round each sculptured post for the admittance of air, stood near the window, on which its occupant frequently turned his glazed and sunken eyes. The sun had gone to rest, the invalid had marked its sinking, and so had those who watched him, and the same thought had occurred to all, but not a word had been spoken; but the roseate flush which it leaves behind still lingered in the heavens, and, as if in mockery, lent momentarily to the dying man's cheek a bright healthy hue such as it was not destined to wear in life again. The flush grew fainter, and faded away, and then a glance at the face, robbed of its artificial glory, must have been conclusive as to the inevitable result. For the cheeks were hollow and sunken, yellowish-white in colour, and cold and clammy to the touch; the eyes, with scarcely any fire left in them, seemed set in large bistre rings; the nose was thin and pinched, and the bloodless lips were tightly compressed with an expression of acute pain.

The Rev. James Ashurst was dying. Every one in Helmingham knew that, and nearly every one had a word of kindness and commiseration for the stricken man, and for his wife and daughter. Dr. Osborne had carried the news up to the Park several days previously, and Sir Thomas had hemmed and coughed, and said, "Dear me!" and Lady Churchill had shaken her head piteously on hearing it. "And nothing much to leave in the way of—eh, my dear doctor?" It was the doctor's turn to shake his head then, and he solaced himself with a large pinch of snuff, taken in a flourishing and sonorous manner,

before he replied that he believed matters in that way were much worse than people thought; that he did not believe there was a single penny—not a single penny: indeed, it was a thing not to be generally talked of, but he might mention it in the strictest confidence to Sir Thomas and my lady, who had always proved themselves such good friends to the Ashursts—that was, he had mentioned to Mrs. Ashurst that there was one faint hope of saving her husband's life, if he would submit to a certain operation which only one man in England, Godby of St. Vitus's Hospital in London, could perform. But when he had mentioned Godby's probable fee—and you could not expect these eminent men to leave their regular work, and come down such a long distance under a large sum—he saw at once how the land lay, and that it was impossible for them to raise the money. Miss Ashurst—curious girl that, so determined and all that kind of thing—had indeed pressed him so hard that he had sent his man over to the telegraph-office at Brocksopp with a message inquiring what would be Godby's exact charge for running down—it was a mere question of distance with these men, so much a mile, and so much for the operation—but he knew the sum he had named was not far out.

From the Park, Dr. Osborne had driven his very decorous little four-wheeler to Woolgreaves, the residence of the Creswells, his other great patients, and there he had given a modified version of his story, with a very much modified result. For old Mr. Creswell was away in France, and neither of the two young ladies was of an age to feel much sympathy, unless with their intimate relations, and they had been educated abroad, and seen but little of the Helmingham folk; and as for Tom Creswell, he was the imp of the school, having all Sam Baker's love of mischief without any of his good heart, and would not have cared who was ill or who died, provided illness or death afforded occasion for slacking work and making holiday. Every one else in the parish was grieved at the

news. The rector—bland, polished, and well endowed with worldly goods—had been most actively compassionate towards his less fortunate brother; the farmers, who looked upon "Master Ashurst" as a marvel of book-learning, the labourers, who had consented to the removal of the village sports, held from time immemorial on the village green, to a remote meadow, whence the noise could not penetrate to the sick man's room, and who had considerately lowered the matter as well as the manner of their singing as they passed the school-house at night in jovial chorus—all these people pitied the old man dying, and the old wife whom he would leave behind. They did not say much about the daughter; when they referred to her it was generally to the effect that she would manage tolerably well for herself, for "she were a right plucked un, Miss Marian were."

They were right. It needed little skill in physiognomy to trace, even under the influence of the special circumstances surrounding her, the pluck and spirit and determination in every feature of Marian Ashurst's face. They were patent to the most ordinary beholder; patent in the brown eye, round rather than elongated, small yet bright as a beryl; in the short sharply curved nose, in the delicately rounded chin, which relieved the jaw of a certain fulness, sufficiently characteristic, but scarcely pretty. Variety of expression was Marian's great charm; her mobile features acting under every impulse of her mind, and giving expression to her every thought. Those who had seen her seldom, or only in one mood, would scarcely have recognised her in another. To the old man, lying stretched on his death-bed, she had been a fairy to be worshipped, a plaything to be for ever prized. In his presence the brown eyes were always bright, the small, sharp, white teeth gleamed between the ripe red lips, and one could scarcely have traced the jaw, that occasionally rose rigid and hard as iron, in the soft expanse of the downy cheek. Had he been able to raise his eyes, he would have seen a very different look in her face as, after

bending over the bed and ascertaining that her fat[illegible] slept, she turned to the other occupant of the room, [illegible] said, more in the tone of one pondering over and repeat[illegible] something previously heard than of a direct question—

"A hundred and thirty guineas, mother!"

For a minute Mrs. Ashurst made her no reply. Her thoughts were far away. She could scarcely realise the scene passing round her, though she had pictured it to herself a hundred times in a hundred different phases. Years ago—how many years ago it seemed!—she was delicate and fragile, and thought she should die before her husband, and she would lie awake for hours in the night, rehearsing her own death-bed, and thinking how she should tell James not to grieve after her, but to marry again, anybody except that Eleanor Shaw, the organist's daughter, and she *should* be sorry to think of that flighty minx going through the linen and china after she was gone. And now the time had really come, and he was going to be taken from her; he, her James, with his big brown eyes and long silky hair, and strong lithe figure, as she first remembered him—going to be taken from her now, and leave her an old woman, poor and lone and forlorn—and Mrs. Ashurst tried to stop the tears which rolled down her face, and to reply to her daughter's strange remark.

"A hundred and thirty guineas! yes, my dear, you're thinking of Mr.—— I forget his name—the surgeon. That was the sum he named."

"You're sure of it, mother?"

"Certain sure, my dear! Mr. Casserly, Dr. Osborne's assistant, a very pleasant-spoken young man, showed me the telegraph message, and I read it for myself. It gave me such a turn that I thought I should have dropped, and Mr. Casserly offered me some sal volatile or peppermint—I mean of his own accord, and never intended to charge for it, I am sure."

"A hundred and thirty guineas! and the one chance of saving his life is to be lost because we cannot command

that sum! Good God! to think of our losing him for want of—— Is there no one, mother, from whom we could get it? Think, think! It's of no use sitting crying there! Think, is there no one who could help us in this strait?"

The feeling of dignity which Mrs. Ashurst knew she ought to have assumed was scared by her daughter's earnestness, so the old lady merely fell to smoothing her dress, and, after a minute's pause, said in a tremulous voice—

"I fear there is no one, my dear! The rector, I dare say, would do something, but I'm afraid your father has already borrowed money of him, and I know he has of Mr. King, the chairman of the governors of the school. I don't know whether Mr. Casserly—— "

"Mr. Casserly, mother, a parish doctor's drudge! Is it likely that he would be able to assist us?"

"Well, I don't know, my dear, about being able, I'm sure he would be willing! He was so kind about that sal volatile that I am sure he would do what—— Lord! we never thought of Mr. Creswell!"

Set and hard as Marian's face had been throughout the dialogue, it grew even more rigid as she heard these words. Her lips tightened, and her brow clouded as she said, "Do you think that I should have overlooked that chance, mother? Do you not know that Mr. Creswell is away in France? He is the very first person to whom I should have thought of applying."

Under any other circumstances, Mrs. Ashurst would have been excessively delighted at this announcement. As it was, she merely said, "The young ladies are at Woolgreaves, I think."

"The young ladies!" repeated Marian, bitterly—"the young ladies! The young dolls—dolts—dummies to try dresses on! What are Maude and Gertrude Creswell to us, mother? What kindness, courtesy even, have they ever shown us? To get at their uncle's purse is what we most need—— "

"Oh, Marian, Marian!" interrupted Mrs. Ashurst, "what are you saying?"

"Saying?" replied Marian calmly—"Saying? The truth! What should I say when I know that if we had the command of Mr. Creswell's purse, father's life might—from what I gather from Dr. Osborne, most probably would—be saved! Are these circumstances under which one should be meek and mild and thankful for one's lot in life! Is this a time to talk of gratitude and—— He's moving! Yes, darling father, Marian is here!"

Two hours afterwards, Marian and Dr. Osborne stood in the porch. There were tears in the eyes of the garrulous but kindly old man; but the girl's eyes were dry, and her face was set harder and more rigid than ever. The doctor was the first to speak.

"Good night, my dear child," said he; "and may God comfort you in your affliction. I have given your poor mother a composing draught, and trust to find her better in the morning. Fortunately, you require nothing of that kind. God bless you, dear! It will be a consolation to you, as it is to me, to know that your father, my dear old friend, went off perfectly placid and peacefully."

"It is a consolation, doctor—more especially as I believe such an ending is rare with people suffering under his disease."

"His disease, child? Why, what do you think your father died of?"

"Think, doctor? I know! Of the want of a hundred and thirty guineas!"

CHAPTER II.

RETROSPECTIVE.

The Reverend James Ashurst had been head master of the Helmingham Grammar School for nearly a quarter of a century. Many old people in the village had a vivid recollection of him as a young man, with his bright brown hair curling over his coat-collar, his frank fearless glances, his rapid jerky walk. They recollected how he was by no means particularly well received by the powers that then were, how he was spoken of as "one of the new school" —a term in itself supposed to convey the highest degree of opprobrium—and how the elders had shaken their heads and prophesied that no good would come of the change, and that it would have been better to have held on to old Dr. Munch, after all. Old Dr. Munch, who had been Mr. Ashurst's immediate predecessor, was as bad a specimen of the old-fashioned, nothing-doing, sinecure-seeking pedagogue as could well be imagined; a rotund, red-faced, gouty-footed divine, with a thick layer of limp white cravat loosely tied round his short neck, and his suit of clerical sables splashed with a culinary spray; a man whose originally small stock of classical learning had gradually faded away, and whose originally large stock of idleness and self-gratification had simultaneously increased. Forty male children, born in lawful wedlock in the parish of Helmingham, and properly presented on the foundation, might have enjoyed the advantages of a free classical and mathematical education at the Grammar School under the will of old Sir Ranulph Clinton, the founder; but, under the lax rule of Dr. Munch, the forty gradually dwindled to twenty, and of these twenty but few attended school in the afternoon, knowing perfectly that for the first few minutes after coming in from dinner the doctor paid but little attention as to which members of the class might be

present, and that in a very few minutes he fell into a state of pleasant and unbroken slumber.

This state of affairs was terrible, and, worst of all, it was getting buzzed abroad. The two or three conscientious boys who really wanted to learn shook their heads in despair, and appealed to their parents to "let them leave;" the score of lads who enjoyed the existing state of affairs were, lad-like, unable to keep it to themselves, and went about calling on their neighbours to rejoice with them; so, speedily, every one knew the state of affairs in Helmingham Grammar School. The trustees of the charity, or "governors," as they were called, had not the least notion how to proceed. They were, for the most part, respectable tradesmen of the place, who had vague ideas about "college" as of a sequestered spot where young men walked about in stuff gowns and trencher caps, and were, by some unexplained circumstance, rendered fit and ready for the bishop to convert into clergymen. There must, they thought, probably be in this "college" some one fit to take the place of old Dr. Munch, who must be got rid of, come what may. At first, the resident "governors"—the tradesmen of Helmingham—thought it best to write to two of their colleagues, who were non-resident, and not by any manner of means tradesmen, being, in fact, two distinguished peers of the realm, who, holding property in the neighbourhood, had, for political reasons, thought fit to cause themselves to be elected governors of old Sir Ranulph Clinton's foundation. The letters explaining the state of affairs and asking for advice were duly written; but matters political were at a standstill just then; there was not the remotest chance of an election for years; and so the two private secretaries of the two noble lords pitched their respective letters into their respective waste-baskets, with mutual grins of pity and contempt for the writers. Thrown back on their own resources, the resident governors determined on applying to the rector; acting under the feeling that he, as a clergyman, must have been to this "college," and would doubtless be able

to put them in the way of securing such a man as they required. And they were right. The then rector, though an old man, still kept up occasional epistolary intercourse with such of his coevals as remained at the university in the enjoyment of dignities of fellowships; and, being himself both literate and conscientious, was by no means sorry to lend a hand towards the removal of Dr. Munch, whom he looked upon as a scandal to the cloth. A correspondence entered into between the rector of Helmingham and the Principal of St. Beowulph's College, Oxford, resulted in the enforced resignation of Dr. Munch as the head master of Helmingham Grammar School, and the appointment of the Reverend James Ashurst as his successor. The old doctor took his fate very calmly; he knew that for a long time he had been doing nothing, and had been sufficiently well paid for it. He settled down in a pleasant village in Kent, where an old crony of his held the position of warden to a City Company's charity, and this history knows him no more.

When James Ashurst received his appointment he was about eight-and-twenty, had taken a double second class, had been scholar and tutor of his college, and stood well for a fellowship. By nature silent and reserved, and having found it necessary for the achievement of his position to renounce nearly all society—for he was by no means a brilliant man, and his successes had been gained by plodding industry, and constant application rather than by the exercise of any natural talent—James Ashurst had but few acquaintances, and to them he never talked of his private affairs. They wondered when they heard that he had renounced certain prospects, notably those of a fellowship, for so poor a preferment as two hundred pounds a year and a free house: for they did not know that the odd, shy, silent man had found time in the intervals of his reading to win the heart of a pretty trusting girl, and that the great hope of his life, that of being able to marry her and take her to a decent home of which she would be mistress, was about to be accomplished.

On a dreary, dull day, in the beginning of a bitter January, Mr. Ashurst arrived at Helmingham. He found the schoolhouse dirty, dingy, and uncomfortable, bearing traces everywhere of the negligence and squalor of its previous occupant; but the chairman of the governors, who met him on his arrival, told him that it should be thoroughly cleaned and renovated during the Easter holidays, and the mention of those holidays caused James Ashurst's heart to leap and throb with an intensity with which house-painting could not possibly have anything to do. In the Easter holidays he was to make Mary Bridger his wife, and that thought sustained him splendidly during the three dreary intervening months, and helped him to make head against a sea of troubles raging round him. For the task on which he had entered was no easy one. Such boys as had remained in the school under the easy rule of Dr. Munch were of a class much lower than that for which the benefits of the foundation had been contemplated by the benevolent old knight, and having been unaccustomed to any discipline, had arrived at a pitch of lawlessness which required all the new master's energy to combat. This necessary strictness made him unpopular with the boys, and at first with their parents, who made loud complaints of their children being "put upon," and in some cases where bodily punishment had been inflicted had threatened retribution. Then the chief tradespeople and the farmers, among whom Dr. Munch had been a daily and nightly guest, drinking his mug of ale or his tumbler of brandy-and-water, smoking his long clay pipe, taking his hand at whist, and listening, if not with pleasure, at any rate without remonstrance, to language and stories more than sufficiently broad and indecorous, found that Mr. Ashurst civilly, but persistently, refused their proffered hospitality, and in consequence pronounced him "stuck-up." No man was more free from class prejudices, but he had been bred in old Somerset country society, where the squirearchy maintained an almost feudal dignity, and his career in college had not taught him the

policy of being on terms of familiarity with those whom Fortune had made his inferiors.

So James Ashurst struggled on during the first three months of his novitiate at Helmingham, earnestly and energetically striving to do his duty, with, it must be confessed, but poor result. The governors of the school had been so impressed by the rector's recommendation, and by the testimonials which the new master had submitted to them, that they expected to find the regeneration of the establishment would commence immediately upon James Ashurst's appearance upon the scene, and were rather disappointed when they found that, while the number of scholars remained much the same as at the time of Dr. Munch's retirement, the general dissatisfaction in the village was much greater than it had ever been during the reign of that summarily-treated pedagogue. The rector, to be sure, remained true to the choice he had recommended, and maintained everywhere that Mr. Ashurst had done very well in the face of the greatest difficulties, and would yet bring Helmingham into notice. But, notwithstanding constant ocular proof to the contrary, the farmers held that in the clerical profession, as in freemasonry, there was a certain occult something beyond the ordinary ken, which bound members of "the cloth" together, and induced them to support each other to the utmost stretch of their consciences—a proceeding which, in the opinion of freethinking Helmingham, allowed for a considerable amount of elasticity.

At length the long-looked-for Easter tide arrived, and James Ashurst hurried away from the dull gray old midland country village to the bright little Thames-bordered town where lived his love. A wedding with the church approach one brilliant pathway of spring flowers, a honeymoon of such happiness as one knows but once in a lifetime, passed in the lovely Lake country, and then Helmingham again. But with a different aspect. The old schoolhouse itself brave in fresh paint and new plaster, its renovated diamond windows, its cleaned slab so classi-

cally eloquent on the merits *fundatoris nostri* let in over the porch, its newly stuccoed fives' wall and fresh-gravelled playground; all this was strange but intelligible. But James Ashurst could not understand yet the change that had come over his inner life. To return after a hard day's grinding in a mill of boys to his own rooms was, during the first three months of his career at Helmingham, merely to exchange active purpose for passive existence. Now, his life did but begin when the labours of the day were over, and he and his wife passed the evenings together, in planning to combat with the present, in delightful anticipations of the future. Mr. Ashurst unwittingly, and without the least intending it, had made a very lucky hit in his selection of a wife, so far as the Helmingham people were concerned. He was "that bumptious" as they expressed it, or as we will more charitably say, he was sufficiently independent, not to care one rap what the Helmingham people thought of anything he did, provided he had, as indeed at that time he always had—for he was conscientious in the highest degree—the knowledge that he was acting rightly according to his light. In a very few weeks the actual sweetness, the quiet frankness, the most enthusiastic charm of Mrs. Ashurst's demeanour had neutralised all the ill-effects of her husband's three months' previous career. She was a small-boned, small-featured, delicate-looking little woman, and as such excited a certain amount of compassion and kindness amid the midland-county ladies, who, as their husbands said of them, "ran big." It was a positive relief to one to hear her soft little treble voice after the booming diapason of the Helmingham ladies, or to see her pretty little fat dimpled hands flashing here and there in some coquetry of needlework after being accustomed to looking on at the steady play of particularly bony and knuckly members in the unremitting torture of eminently utilitarian employment. High and low, gentle and simple, rich and poor, still felt equally kindly disposed towards Mrs. Ashurst. Mrs. Peacock, wife of Squire Peacock, a tre-

mendous magnate and squire of the neighbouring parish, fell so much in love with her that she made her husband send their only son, a magnificent youth destined eventually for Eton, Oxford, Parliament, and a partnership in a brewery, to be introduced to the Muses as a parlour-boarder in Mr. Ashurst's house; and Hiram Brooks, the blacksmith and minister of the Independent Chapel, who was at never-ending war with all the members of the Establishment, made a special exception in Mrs. Ashurst's favour, and doffed his greasy leathern cap to her as she passed the forge.

And his pretty little wife brought him good fortune, as well as domestic happiness? James Ashurst delighted to think so. His popularity in the village, and in the surrounding country, was on the increase; the number of scholars on the foundership had reached its authorised limit (a source of great gratification, though of no pecuniary profit to the head master); and Master Peacock had now two or three fellow-boarders, each of whom paid a fine annual sum. The governors thought better of their head master now, and the old rector had lived long enough to see his recommendation thoroughly accepted, and his prophecy, as regards the improved status of the school, duly fulfilled. Popular, successful in his little way, and happy in his domestic relations, James Ashurst had but one want. His wife was childless, and this was to him a source of discomfort, always felt and occasionally expressed. He was just the man who would have doated on a child, would have suffered himself to have been pleasantly befooled by its gambols, and have worshipped it in every phase of its tyranny. But it was not to be, he supposed; that was to be the one black drop in his draught of happiness: and then, after he had been married for five or six years, Mrs. Ashurst brought him a little daughter. His hopes were accomplished, but he nearly lost his wife in their accomplishment; while he dandled the newly born treasure in his arms, Mrs. Ashurst's life was despaired of; and when the chubby baby had grown up into a strong

child, and from that sphere of life had softened down into a peaceful girl, her mother, always slight and delicate, had become a constant invalid, whose ill-health caused her husband the greatest anxiety, and almost did away with the delight he had in anticipating every wish of his darling little Marian.

James Ashurst had longed for a child, and he loved his little daughter dearly when she came; but even then his wife held the deepest and most sacred place in his heart, and as he marked her faded cheek and lustreless eye, he felt a pang of remorse, and accused himself of having set himself up against the just judgment of Providence, and having now received the due reward of his repining. For one who thought his darling must be restored to health, no sacrifice could be too great to accomplish that result; and the Helmingham people, who loved Mrs. Ashurst dearly, but who in their direst straits were never accustomed to look for any other advice than that which could be afforded them by Dr. Osborne, or his village opponent, Mr. Sharood, were struck with admiration when Dr. Langton, the great county physician, the oracle of Brocksopp, was called into consultation. Dr. Langton was a very little man, noted almost as much for his reticence as his skill. He never wasted a word. After a careful examination of Mrs. Ashurst he pronounced it to be a tiresome case, and prescribed a four months' residence at the baths of Ems as the likely treatment to effect a mitigation, if not a cure. Dr. Osborne, after the great man's departure, laughed aloud in his bluff way at the idea of a country schoolmaster sending his wife to Ems.

"Langton is so much in the habit of going about among the country families, and these *novi homines* of manufacturers who stink of brass, as they say in these parts, that he forgets there is such a thing as having to look carefully at ways and means, my dear Ashurst, and make both dovetail. Baths of Ems, indeed! I'm afraid you've thrown away your ten guineas, my good friend, if that's all you've got out of Langton!"

But Dr. Osborne's smile was suddenly checked when Mr. Ashurst said very quietly that as his wife's health was dearer to him than anything on earth, and that there was no sacrifice which he would not make to accomplish its restoration, he should find means of sending her to Germany, and keeping her there until it was seen what effect the change had on her.

And he did it! For two successive summers Mrs. Ashurst went to Ems with the old nurse who had brought her up, and accompanied her from her pretty river-side home to Helmingham; and at the end of the second season she returned comparatively well and strong. But she needed all her strength and health when she looked at her husband, who came to meet her in London, and found him thin, changed, round-shouldered, and hollow-eyed, the very shadow of his former self. James Ashurst had carried through his plans as regarded his wife at enormous sacrifice. He had no ready money to meet the sudden call upon his purse which such an expedition rendered necessary, and he had recourse to money-lenders to raise the first loans required, then to friends to pay the interest on and obtain renewals of these loans, then to other money-lenders to replace the original sums, and to other friends to repay a portion of the first friendly loans, until by the time his wife returned from the second visit to the Continent he found himself so inextricably involved that he dare not face his position, dare not think of it himself, much less have taken her into his confidence, and so went blindly on, paying interest on interest, and hoping ever with a vague hope for some relief from his troubles.

That relief never came to James Ashurst in his lifetime. He struggled on in the same hopeless, helpless, hand-to-mouth fashion for about eight years more, always impecunious in the highest degree, always intending to retrieve his fallen fortune, always slowly but surely breaking and becoming less and less of a man under the harass of pecuniary troubles, when the illness which for some time had threatened him set in, and, as we have seen, he died.

CHAPTER III.

MARIAN.

THE little child who was so long prayed for, and who came at last in answer to James Ashurst's fervent prayers, had nothing during her childhood to distinguish her from ordinary children. It is scarcely worthy of record that her mother had a hundred anecdotes illustrative of her precocity, of her difference from other infants, of certain peculiarities never before noticed in a child of tender years. All mothers say these things whether they believe them or not, and Mrs. Ashurst, stretched on her sick-couch, did believe them, and found in watching what she believed to be the abnormal gambols of her child, a certain relief from the constant, dreary, wearing pain which sapped her strength, and rendered her life void and colourless and unsatisfactory. James Ashurst believed them fervently; even if they had required a greater amount of credulity than that which he was blessed with, he, knowing it gave the greatest pleasure to his wife, would have stuck to the text that Marian was a wonderful, "really, he might say, a very wonderful child." But he had never seen anything of childhood since his own, which he had forgotten, and the awakening of the commonest faculties in his daughter came upon him as extraordinary revelations of subtle character, which, when their possessor had arrived at years of maturity, would astonish the world. The Helmingham people did not subscribe to these opinions. Most of them had children of their own, who, they considered, were quite as eccentric, and odd, and peculiar as Marian Ashurst. "Not that I'm for 'lowin that to be pert and sassy one minute, and sittin' mumchance wi'out sa much as a word to throw at a dog the next, is quite manners," they would say among themselves; "but what's ye to expect? Poor Mrs. Ashurst layin' on the brode of her

back, and little enough of that, poor thing, and that poor feckless creature, the schoolmaster, buzzed i' his 'ed wi' book larnin' and that! A pretty pair to bring up such a tyke as Miss Madge!"

That was in the very early days of her life. As the "tyke" grew up she dropped all outward signs of tykishness, and seemed to be endeavouring to prove that eccentricity was the very last thing to be ascribed to her. The Misses Lewin, whose finishing-school was renowned throughout the county, declared they had never had so quick or so hardworking a pupil as Miss Ashurst, or one who had done them so much credit in so short a time. The new rector of Helmingham declared that he should not have known how to get through his class and parish work had it not been for the assistance which he had received from Miss Ashurst at times when—when really—well, other young ladies would, without the slightest harm to themselves, be it said, have been enjoying themselves in the croquet-ground. When the wardrobe woman retired from the school to enter into the bonds of wedlock with the drill-sergeant (whose expansive chest and manly figure, when going through the "exercise without clubs," might have softened Medusa herself), Marian Ashurst at once took upon herself the vacant situation, and resolutely refused to allow any one else to fill it. These may have been put down as eccentricities; they were evidences of odd character certainly not usually found in girls of Marian's age, but they were proofs of a spirit far above tykishness. All her best friends, except, of course, the members of her family whose views regarding her were naturally extremely circumscribed, noticed in the girl an exceedingly great desire for the acquisition of knowledge, a power of industry and application quite unusual, an extraordinary devotion to anything she undertook, which suffered itself to be turned away by no temptation, to be wearied by no fatigue. Always eager to help in any scheme, always bright-eyed and clear-headed and keen-witted, never unduly asserting herself, but always having

her own way while persuading her interlocutors that she was following their dictates, the odd shy child grew up into a girl less shy, indeed, but scarcely less odd. And certainly not lovable: those who fought her battles most strongly—and even in that secluded village there were social and domestic battles, strong internecine warfare, carried on with as much rancour as in the great city itself—were compelled to admit there was "a something" in her which they disliked, and which occasionally was eminently repulsive.

This something had developed itself strongly in the character of the child, before she emerged into girlhood; and though it remained vague as to definition, while distinct as to impression in the minds of others, Marian herself understood it perfectly, and could have told any one, had she chosen, what it was that made her unlike the other children, apart from her being brighter and smarter than they, a difference which she also perfectly understood. She would have said, "I am very fond of money, and the others are not; they are content to have food and clothes, but I like to see the money that is paid for them, and to have some of it, all for myself, and to heap it up and look at it, and I am not satisfied as they are, when they have what they want—I want better things, nicer food, and smarter clothes, and more than them, the money. I don't say so, because I know papa hasn't got it, and so he cannot give it to me; but I wish he could. There is no use talking and grumbling about things we cannot have; people laugh at you, and are glad you are so foolish when you do that, so I say nothing about it, but I wish I was rich."

Marian would have made some such answer to any one who should have endeavoured to get at her mind to find out what that was lurking there, never clearly seen, but always plainly felt, which made her "old fashioned," in other than the pathetic and interesting sense in which that expression has come to be used with reference to children, before she had entered upon her teens.

A clever mother would have found out this grave and ominous component of the child's character—would have interpreted the absence of the thoughtless extravagance, so charming, if sometimes so trying, of childhood—would have been quick to have noticed that Marian asked, "What will it cost?" and gravely entered into mental calculation on occasions when other children would have demanded the purchase of a coveted article clamorously, and shrieked if it were refused. But Mrs. Ashurst was not a clever mother—she was only a loving, indulgent, rather helpless one; and the little Marian's careful ways were such a practical comfort to her, while the child was young, that it never occurred to her to investigate their origin, to ask whether such a very desirable and fortunate effect could by possibility have a reprehensible, dangerous, insidious cause. Marian never wasted her pennies, Marian never spoiled her frocks, Marian never lost or broke anything; all these exceptional virtues Mrs. Ashurst carefully noted and treasured in the storehouse of her memory. What she did not notice was, that Marian never gave anything away, never voluntarily shared any of her little possessions with her playfellows, and, when directed to do so, complied with a reluctance which all her pride, all her brave dread of the appearance of being coerced, hardly enabled her to subdue, and suffered afterwards in an unchildlike way. What she did not observe was, that Marian was not to be taken in by glitter and show; that she preferred, from the early days in which her power of exhibiting her preference was limited by the extent of the choice which the toy-merchant—who combined hardbake and hair-dressing with ministering to the pleasures of infancy—afforded within the sum of sixpence. If Marian took any one into her confidence, or asked advice on such solemn occasions—generally ensuing on a protracted hoarding of the coin in question—it would not be by the questions, "Is it the prettiest?" Is it the nicest?" but, "Do you think it is worth sixpence?" and the child would look from the toy to the money, held closely in the shut palm of her chubby

hand, with a perturbed countenance, in which the pleasure of the acquisition was almost neutralised by the pain of the payment—a countenance in which the spirit of barter was to be discerned by knowing eyes. But none such took note of Marian's childhood. The illumination of love is rather dazzling than searching in the case of mothers of Mrs. Ashurst's class, and she was dazzled. Marian was perfection in her eyes, and at an age at which the inversion of the relations between mother and daughter, common enough in later life, would have appeared to others unreasonable, preposterous, Mrs. Ashurst surrendered herself wholly, happily, to the guidance and the care of her daughter. The inevitable self-assertion of the stronger mind took place, the inevitable submission of the weaker. In this instance, a gentle, persuasive, unconscious self-assertion, a joyful yielding, without one traversing thought of humiliation or deposition.

Her daughter was so clever, so helpful, so grave, so good; her economy and management—surely they were wonderful in so young a girl, and must have come to her by instinct?—rendered life such a different, so much easier a thing, delicate as she was, and requiring so disproportionate a share of their small means to be expended on her, that it was not surprising Mrs. Ashurst should see no possibility of evil in the origin of such qualities.

As for Marian's father, he was about as likely to discover a comet or a continent as to discern a flaw in his daughter's moral nature. The child, so longed for, so fervently implored, remained always, in her father's sight, Heaven's best gift to him; and he rejoiced exceedingly, and wondered not a little, as she developed into the girl whom we have seen beside his death-bed. He rejoiced because she was so clever, so quick, so ready, had such a masterly mind and happy faculty of acquiring knowledge; knowledge of the kind he prized and reverenced; of the kind which he felt would remain to her, an inheritance for her life. He wondered why she was so strong, for he

knew she did not take the peculiar kind of strength of character from him or from her mother.

It was not to be wondered at that these peculiarities of Marian Ashurst were noticed by the inhabitants of the village where she was born, and where her childish days had been passed; but it was remarkable that they were regarded with anything but admiration. For a keen appreciation of money, and an unfailing determination to obtain their money's worth, had long been held to be eminently characteristic of the denizens of Helmingham. The cheesefactor used to declare that the hardest bargains throughout his county connection were those which Mrs. Croke, and Mrs. Whicher, and, worst of all, old Mrs. M'Shaw (who, though Helmingham born and bred, had married Sandy M'Shaw, a Scotch gardener, imported by old Squire Creswell) drove with him. Not the very best ale to be found in the cellars of the Lion at Brocksopp (and they could give you a good glass of ale, bright, beaming, and mellow, at the Lion, when they choose), not the strongest mahogany-coloured brandy-and-water, mixed in the bar by the fair hands of Miss Parkhurst herself, not even the celebrated rum-punch, the recipe of which, like the songs of the Scandinavian scalds, had never been written out, but had descended orally to old Tilley, the short, stout, rubicund landlord—had ever softened the heart of a Helmingham farmer in the matter of business, or induced him to take a shilling less on a quarter of wheat, or a truss of straw, than he had originally made up his mind to sell it at.

"Canny Helmingham" was its name throughout the county, and its people were proud of it. Mr. Chambré, an earnest clergyman who had succeeded the old rector, had been forewarned of the popular prejudice, and on the second Sunday of his ministry addressed his parishioners in a very powerful and eloquent discourse upon the wickedness of avarice and the folly of heaping up worldly riches; after which, seeing that the only effect his sermon had was to lay him open to palpable rudeness, he wisely concentrated his

energies on his translation of Horace's Odes (which has since gained him such great renown, and of which at least forty copies have been sold), and left his parishioners' souls to take care of themselves. But however canny and saving they might be, and however, sharply they might battle with the cheesefactor and look after the dairymaid, as behoved farmers' wives in these awful days of free trade (they had a firm belief in Helmingham that "Cobden," under which generic name they understood it, was a kind of pest, as is the smut in wheat, or the tick in sheep), all the principal dames in the village were greatly shocked at the unnatural love of money which it was impossible to help noticing in Marian Ashurst.

"There was time enow to think o' they things, money and such-like fash, when pipple was settled down," as Mrs. Croke said; "but to see children hardenin' their hearts and scrooin' their pocket-money is unnatural, to say the least of it!" It was unnatural and unpopular in Helmingham. Mrs. Croke put such a screw on the cheesefactor, that in the evening after his dealings with her, that worthy filled the commercial room at the Lion with strange oaths and modern instances of sharp dealing in which Mrs. Croke bore away the palm; but she was highly indignant when Lotty Croke's godmother bought her a savings-bank, a gray edifice, with what theatrical people call a practicable chimney, down which the intended savings should be deposited. Mrs. Whicher's dairymaid, who, being from Ireland, and a Roman Catholic in faith, was looked upon with suspicion, not to say fear, in the village, and who was regarded by the farmers as in constant though secret communication with the Pope of Rome and the Jesuit College generally, declared that her mistress "canthered the life out of her" in the matter of small wages and much work; but Mrs. Whicher's daughter, Emily, had more crimson gowns, and more elegant bonnets, with regular fields of poppies, and perfect harvests of ears of corn growing out of them, than any of her compeers, for which choice articles the heavy bill of Madame Morgan—formerly of

Paris, now of Brocksopp—was paid without a murmur. "It's unnat'ral in a gell like Marian Ashurst to think so much o' money and what it brings," would be a frequent remark at one of those private Helmingham institutions known as "thick teas." And then Mrs. Croke would say, "And what like will a gell o' that sort look to marry? Why, a man maun have poun's and poun's before she'd say 'yea' and buckle to!"

But that was a matter which Marian had already decided upon.

CHAPTER IV.

MARIAN'S CHOICE.

At a time when it seemed as though the unchildlike qualities which had distinguished the child from her playmates and coevals were intensifying and maturing in the girl growing up, then, to all appearance, hard, calculating, and mercenary, Marian Ashurst fell in love, and thenceforward the whole current of her being was diverted into healthier and more natural channels. Fell in love is the right and the only description of the process so far as Marian was concerned. Of course she had frequently discussed the great question which racks the hearts of boarding-school misses, and helps to fill up the spare time of middle-aged women, with her young companions, had listened with outward calmness and propriety, but with an enormous amount of unshown cynicism, to their simple gushings, and had said sufficient to lead them to believe that she joined in their fervent admiration of and aspiration for young men with black eyes and white hands, straight noses and curly hair. But all the time Marian was building for herself a castle in the air, the proprietor of which, whose wife she intended to be, was a very different person

from the hairdressers' dummies whose regularity of feature caused the hearts of her companions to palpitate. The personal appearance of her future husband had never given her an instant's care; she had no preference in the colour of his eyes or hair, in his height, style, or even of his age, except she thought she would rather he were old. Being old, he was more likely to be generous, less likely to be selfish, more likely to have amassed riches and to be wealthy. His fortune would be made, not to be made; there would be no struggling, no self-denial, no hope required. Marian's domestic experiences caused her to hate anything in which hope was required; she had been dosed with hope without the smallest improvement, and had lost faith in the treatment. Marriage was the one chance possible for her to carry out the dearest, most deeply implanted, longest-cherished aspiration of her heart—the acquisition of money and power. She knew that the possession of the one led to the other; from the time when she had saved her schoolgirl pennies and had noticed the court paid to her by her little friends, to the then moment when the mere fact of her having a small stock of ready money, even more than her sense and shrewdness, gave her position in that impecunious household, she had recognised the impossibility of achieving even a semblance of happiness in poverty. When she married, it should be for money, and for money alone. In the hard school of life in which she had been trained she had learned that the prize she was aiming at was a great one, and one difficult to be obtained; but that knowledge only made her the more determined in its pursuit. The difficulties around her were immense; in the narrow circle in which she lived she had not any present chances of meeting with any person likely to be able to give her the position which she sought, far less of rendering him subservient to her wishes. But she waited and hoped; she was waiting and hoping, calmly and quietly fulfilling the ordinary duties of her very ordinary life, but never losing sight of her fixed intent. Then across the path of her life there came a man who seemed to give promise of

eventually fulfilling the requirements she had planned out for herself. It was but a promise; there was nothing tangible; but the promise was so good, and the girl's heart yearned for an occupant, for, with all its hard teaching and its worldly aspirations, it was but human after all. So her human heart and her worldly wisdom come to a compromise in the matter of her acceptance of a lover, and the result of that compromise was her engagement to Walter Joyce.

When the Helmingham Grammar School was under the misrule of old Dr. Munch, then at its lowest ebb, and nominations to the foundation were to be had for the asking, and, indeed, in many cases sent a-begging, it occurred to the old head master to offer one of the vacancies to Mr. Joyce, the principal grocer and maltster of the village, whose son was then just of an age to render him accessible to the benefits of the education which Sir Ranulph Clinton had devised to the youth of Helmingham, and which was being so imperfectly supplied to them under the auspices of Dr. Munch. You must not for an instant imagine that the offer was made by the old doctor out of pure lovingkindness and magnanimity; he looked at it, as he did at most things, from a purely practical point of view: he owed Joyce the grocer so much money, and if Joyce the grocer would write him a receipt in full for all his indebtedness in return for a nomination for Joyce junior, at least he, the doctor, would not have done a bad stroke of business. He would have wiped out an existing score, the value of which proceeding meant, in Dr. Munch's eyes, that he would be enabled at once to commence a fresh one, while the acquisition of young Joyce as a scholar would not cause one atom of difference in the manner in which the school was conducted, or rather, left to conduct itself. The offer was worth making, for the debt was heavy, though the doctor was by no means sure of its being accepted. Andrew Joyce was not Helmingham-born; he had come from Spindleton, one of the large inland capitals, and had purchased the business which he owned. He was not

popular among the Helmingham folk, who were all strict church-people so far as morning-service attending, tithe-paying, and parson-respecting were concerned, from the fact that his religious tendencies were suspected to be what the villagers termed "Methodee." He had his seat in the village church, it is true, and put in an appearance there on the Sunday morning; but instead of spending the Sabbath evening in the orthodox way—which at Helmingham consisted in sitting in the best parlour with a very dim light, and enjoying the blessings of sound sleep while Nelson's *Fasts and Festivals*, or some equally proper work, rested on the sleeper's knee, until it fell off with a crash, and was only recovered to be held upside down until the grateful announcement of the arrival of supper—Mr. Joyce was in the habit of dropping into Salem Chapel, where Mr. Stoker, a shining light from the pottery district, dealt forth the most uncomfortable doctrine in the most forcible manner. The Helmingham people declared, too, that Andrew Joyce was "uncanny" in other ways; he was close-fisted and niggardly, his name was to be found on no subscription-list; he was litigious; he declared that Mr. Prickett, the old-fashioned solicitor of the village, was too slow for him, and he put his law-matters into the hands of Messrs. Sheen and Nasmyth, attorneys at Brocksopp, who levied a distress before other people had served a writ, and who were considered the sharpest practitioners in the county. Old Dr. Munch had heard of the process of Messrs. Sheen and Nasmyth, and the dread of any of it being exercised on him originally prompted his offer to Andrew Joyce. He knew that he might count on an ally in Andrew Joyce's wife, a superior woman, in very delicate health, who had great influence with her husband, and who was devoted to her only son. Mrs. Joyce, when Hester Baines, had been a Bible-class teacher in Spindleton, and had had herself a fair amount of education—would have had more, for she was a very earnest woman in her vocation, ever striving to gain more knowledge herself for the mere purpose of imparting it to others, but from her early youth

she had been fighting with a spinal disease, to which she was gradually succumbing; so that although sour granite-faced Andrew Joyce was not the exact helpmate that the girl so full of love and trust could have chosen for herself, when he offered her his hand and his home, she was glad to avail herself of the protection thus afforded, and of the temporary peace which she could thus enjoy until called, as she thought she should be, very speedily to her eternal rest.

That call did not come nearly as soon as Hester Baines had anticipated, not, indeed, until nearly a score of years after she gave up Bible-teaching, and became Andrew Joyce's wife. In the second year of her marriage a son was born to her, and thenceforward she lived for him, and for him alone. He was a small, delicate, sallow-faced boy, with enormous liquid eyes, and rich red lips, and a long throat, and thin limbs, and long skinny hands. A shy retiring lad, with an invincible dislike to society of any kind, even that of other boys; with a hatred of games and fun, and an irrepressible tendency to hide away somewhere, anywhere, in an old lumber-room amid the disused trunks, and broken clothes-horses, and general lumber, or under the wide-spreading branches of a tree, and then, extended, prone on his stomach, to lie with his head resting on his hands, and a book flat between his face-supporting arms. He got licked before he had been a week at the school, because he openly stated he did not like half-holidays, a doctrine which when first whispered among his schoolfellows was looked upon as incredible, but which, on proof of its promulgation, brought down upon its holder severe punishment.

Despite of all Dr. Munch's somnolency and neglect, despite of all his class fellows' idleness, ridicule, or contumely, young Joyce would learn, would make progress, would acquire accurate information in a very extraordinary way. When Mr. Ashurst assumed the reins of government at Helmingham Grammar School, the proficiency, promise, and industry of Walter Joyce were the only

things that gave the new dominie the smallest gleam of interest in his fresh avocation. With the advent of the new head master Walter Joyce entered upon another career; for the first time in his life he found some one to appreciate him, some one who could understand his work, praise what he had done, and encourage him to greater efforts. This had hitherto been wanting in the young man's life. His father liked to know that the boy "stuck to his book;" but was at last incapable of understanding what that sticking to the book produced; and his mother, though conscious that her son possessed talent such as she had always coveted for him, had no idea of the real extent of his learning. James Ashurst was the only one in Helmingham who could rate his scholar's gifts at their proper value, and the dominie's kind heart yearned with delight at the prospect of raising such a creditable flower of learning in such unpromising soil. He busied himself, not merely with the young man's present but with his future. It was his greatest hope that one of the scholarships at his old college should be gained by a pupil from Helmingham, and that that pupil should be Walter Joyce. Mr. Ashurst had been in communication with the college authorities on the subject; he had obtained a very unwilling assent—an assent that would have been a refusal had it not been for Mrs. Joyce's influence—from Walter's father that he would give his son an adequate sum for his maintenance at the University, and he was looking forward to a quick-coming time when a scholarship should be vacant, for which he was certain Walter had a most excellent chance, when Mrs. Joyce had a fit and died.

From that time forth Andrew Joyce was a changed man. He had loved his wife in his grim, sour, puritanical way, loved her sufficiently to strive against this grimness and puritanism to the extent of his consenting to live for the most part from the ordinary fashion of the world. But when that gentle influence was once removed, when the hard-headed, narrow-minded man had no longer the soft answer to turn away his wrath, the soft face to look

appealingly up against his harsh judgment, the quick intellect to combat his one-sided dogmatisms, he fell away at once, and blossomed out as the bitter bigot into which he had gradually but surely been growing. No college education for his son then; no assistance from him for a bloated hierarchy, as he remarked at a public meeting, glancing at Mr. Sifton, the curate, who had eighty pounds a year and four children; no money of his to be spent by his son in a dissolute and debauched career at the University. Mr. Stoker had not been at any university—as, indeed, he had not, having picked up most of his limited education from a travelling tinker, who combined pot-mending and knife-grinding with Bible and tract selling; —and where would you meet with a better preacher of the Gawspel, a more shining light, or a comelier vessel? Mr. Stoker was all in all to Andrew Joyce then, and when Andrew Joyce died, six months afterwards, it was found that, with the exception of the legacy of a couple of hundred pounds to his son, he had left all his money to Mr. Stoker, and to the chapel and charities represented by that erudite divine.

It was a sad blow to Walter Joyce, and almost as sharp a one to James Ashurst. The two men—Walter was a man now—grieved together over the overturned hopes and the extinguished ambition. It was impossible for Walter to attempt to go to college just then. There was no scholarship vacant, and if there had been, the amount to be won might probably have been insufficient even for this modest youth. There was no help for it; he must give up the idea. What, then, was he to do? Mr. Ashurst answered that in his usual impulsive way. Walter should become under master in the school. The number of boys had increased immensely. There was more work than he and Dr. Breitmann could manage; oh yes, he was sure of it—he had thought so a long time; and Walter should become third classical master, with a salary of sixty pounds a year, and board and lodging in Mr. Ashurst's house. It was a rash and wild suggestion, just

likely to emanate from such a man as James Ashurst. The number of boys had increased, and Mr. Ashurst's energy had decreased; but there was Dr. Breitmann, a kindly, well-read, well-educated doctor of philosophy, from Leipzig; a fine classical scholar, though he pronounced "amo" as "ahmo," and "Dido" as "Taito," a gentleman, though his clothes were threadbare, and he only ate meat once a week, and sometimes not then unless he were asked out, and a disciplinarian, though he smoked like a limekiln; a habit which in the Helmingham schoolboys' eyes proclaimed the confirmed debauchee of the Giovanni or man-about-town type. Walter Joyce had been a favourite pupil of the doctor's, and was welcomed as a colleague by his old tutor with the utmost warmth. It was understood that his engagement was only temporary; he would soon have enough money to enable him, with a scholarship, to astonish the University, and then—— Meanwhile Mr. Ashurst and all around repeated that his talents were marvellous, and his future success indisputable.

That was the reason why Marian Ashurst fell in love with him. As has before been said, she thought nothing of outward appearance, although Walter Joyce had grown into a sufficiently comely man, small indeed, but with fine eyes and an eloquent mouth, and a neatly turned figure; nor, though a refined and educated girl, did she estimate his talents save for what they would bring. He was to make a success in his future life; that was what she thought of—her father said so, and so far, in matters of cleverness and book-learning, and so on, her father's opinion was worth something. Walter Joyce was to make money and position, the two things of which she thought, and dreamed, and hoped for night and day. There was no one else among her acquaintance with his power. No farmer within the memory of living generations had done more to keep up the homestead bequeathed to him whilst attempting to increase the number or the value of his fields, and even the gratification of her

love of money would have been but a poor compensation to a girl of Marian's innate good breeding and refinement for being compelled to pass her life in the society of a boor or a churl. No! Walter Joyce combined the advantage of education and good looks with the prospect of attaining wealth and distinction: he was her father's favourite, and was well thought of by everybody, and—and she loved him very much, and was delighted to comfort herself with the thought that in doing so she had not sacrificed any of what she was pleased to consider the guiding principles of her life.

And he, Walter Joyce, did he reciprocate—was he in love with Marian? Has it ever been your lot to see an ugly or, better still, what is called an ordinary man—for ugliness has become fashionable both in fiction and in society—to see an ordinary-looking man, hitherto politely ignored, if not snubbed, suddenly taken special notice of by a handsome woman, a recognised leader of the set, who, for some special purpose of her own, suddenly discovering that he has brains, or conversational power, or some peculiar fascination, singles him out from the surrounding ruck, steeps him in the sunlight of her eyes, and intoxicates him with the subtle wiles of her address? It does one good, it acts as a moral shower-bath, to see such a man under such circumstances. Your fine fellow simpers and purrs for a moment, and takes it all as real legitimate homage to his beauty; but the ordinary man cannot, so soon as he has got over his surprise at the sensation, cannot be too grateful, cannot find ways and means—cumbrous frequently and ungraceful, but eminently sincere—of showing his appreciation of his patroness. Thus it was with Walter Joyce. The knowledge that he was a grocer's son had added immensely to the original shyness and sensitiveness of his disposition, and the free manner in which his small and delicate personal appearance had been made the butt of outspoken "chaff" of the schoolboys had made him singularly misogynistic. Since the early days of his youth, when he had been compelled to

give a very unwilling attendance twice a week at the dancing academy of Mr. Hardy, where the boys of the Helmingham Grammar School had their manners softened, nor were suffered to become brutal, by the study of the Terpsichorean art, in the company of the young ladies from the Misses Lewins' establishment, Walter Joyce had resolutely eschewed any and every charge of mixing in female society. He knew nothing of it, and pretended to despise it. It is needless to say, therefore, that so soon as he was brought into daily communication with a girl like Marian Ashurst, possessed both of beauty and refinement, he fell hopelessly in love with her, and gave up every thought, idea, and hope, save that in which she bore a part. She was his goddess, and he would worship her humbly and at a distance. It would be sufficient for him to touch the hem of her robe, to hear the sound of her voice, to gaze at her with big dilated eyes, which—not that he knew it—were eloquent with love, and tenderness, and worship.

Their love was known to each other, and to but very few else. Mr. Ashurst, looking up from his newspaper in the blessed interval between the departure of the boys to bed and the modest little supper, the only meal which the family—in which Joyce was included—had in private, may have noticed the figures of his daughter and his usher, not his favourite pupil, lingering in the deepening twilight round the lawn, or seen "their plighted shadows blended into one" in the soft rays of the moonlight. But if he thought anything about it, he never made any remark. Life was very hard and very earnest with James Ashurst, and he may have found something softening and pleasing in this little bit of romance, something which he may have wished to leave undisturbed by worldly suggestions or practical hints. Or, he may have had his idea of what was actually going on. A man with an incipient disease beginning to tell upon him, with a sickly wife, and a perpetual striving not merely to make both ends meet, but to prevent them bursting so wide asunder as to leave a gap through which he must inevitably fall into

ruin between them, has but little time, or opportunity, or inclination, for observing narrowly the conduct even of those near and dear to him. Mrs. Ashurst, in her invalid state, was only too glad to think that the few hours which Marian took in respite for attendance on her mother were pleasantly employed, to inquire where or in whose society they were passed—neither Marian's family nor Joyce kept any company by whom their absence would be missed; and as for the villagers, they had fully made up their minds on the one side that Marian was determined to make a splendid match; on the other, that the mere fact of Walter Joyce's scholarship was so great as to incapacitate him from the pursuit of ordinary human frailties: so that not the ghost of a speculation as to the relative position of the couple had arisen amongst them. And the two young people loved, and hoped, and erected their little castles in the air, which were palatial indeed as hope-depicted by Marian, though less ambitious as limned by Walter Joyce, when Mr. Ashurst's death came upon them like a thunderbolt, and blew their unsubstantial edifices into the air.

See them here on this calm summer evening, pacing round and round the lawn, as they used to do, in the old days already ages ago as it seems, when James Ashurst, newspaper in hand, would throw occasional glances at them from the study window. Marian, instead of letting her fingers lightly touch her companion's wrist, as is her wont, has passed her arms through his, and her fingers are clasped together round it, and she looks up in his face, as they come to a standstill beneath the big outspread branches of the old oak, with an earnest tearful gaze such as she has seldom, if ever, worn before. There must be matter of moment between these two just now, for Joyce's face looks wan and worn; there are deep hollows beneath his large eyes, and he strives ineffectually to conceal, with an occasional movement of his hand, the rapid anxious play of the muscles round his mouth. Marian is the first to speak.

"And so you take Mr. Benthall's decision as final, Walter, and are determined to go to London?"

"Darling, what else can I do? Here is Mr. Benthall's letter, in which he tells me that, without the least wish to disturb me—a mere polite phrase that—he shall bring his own assistant master to Helmingham. He writes and means kindly, I've no doubt—but here's the fact!"

"Oh yes, I'm sure he's a gentleman, Walter; his letter to mamma proves that, offering to defer his arrival at the school-house until our own time. Of course that is impossible, and we go into Mrs. Swainson's lodgings at once."

"My dearest Marian, my own pet, I hate to think of you in lodgings; I cannot bear to picture you so!"

"You must make haste to get your position, and take me to share it, then, Walter!" said the girl, with a half-melancholy smile; "you must do great things, Walter. Dear papa always said you would, and you must prove how right he was."

"Dearest, your poor father calculated on my success at college for the furtherance of my fortune, and now all that chance is over! Whatever I do now must be——"

"By the aid of your own talent and industry, exactly the same appliances which you had to rely on if you had gone to the University, Walter. You don't fear the result? You're not alarmed and desponding at the turn which affairs have taken? It's impossible you can fail to attain distinction, and—and money and—and position, Walter—you must,—don't you feel it?—you must!"

"Yes, dear, I feel it; I hope—I think; perhaps not so strongly, so enthusiastically as you do. You see,—don't be downcast, Marian, but it's best to look these things in the face, darling!—all I can try to get is a tutor's, or an usher's, or a secretary's place, and in any of these the want of the University stamp is heavily against me. There's no disguising that, Marian!"

"Oh, indeed; is that so?"

"Yes, child, undoubtedly. The University degree is like the Hall-mark in silver, and I'm afraid I shall find very few persons willing to accept me as the genuine article without it."

"And all this risk might have been avoided if your father had only——"

"Well, yes; but then, Marian darling, if my father had left me money to go to college immediately on his death I should never have known you—known you, I mean, as you are, the dearest and sweetest of women."

He drew her to him as he spoke, and pressed his lips on her forehead. She received the kiss without any undue emotion, and said—

"Perhaps that had been for the best, Walter."

"Marian, that's rank blasphemy. Fancy my hearing that, especially, too, on the night of my parting with you! No, my darling, all I want you to have is hope, hope and courage, and not too much ambition, dearest. Mine has been comparatively but a lotus-eating existence hitherto; to-morrow I begin the battle of life."

"But slightly armed for the conflict, my poor Walter."

"I don't allow that, Marian. Youth, health, and energy are not bad weapons to have on one's side, and with your love in the background——"

"And the chance of achieving fame and fortune for yourself—keep that in the foreground!"

"That is to me, in every way, less than the other; but it is, of course, an additional spur. And now——?"

And then? When two lovers are on the eve of parting, their conversation is scarcely very interesting to any one else. Marian and Walter talked the usual pleasant nonsense, and vowed the usual constancy, took four separate farewells of each other, and parted with broken accents and lingering hand-clasps, and streaming eyes. But when Marian Ashurst sat before her toilet-glass that night in the room which had so long been her own, and which she was so soon to vacate, she thought of what Walter Joyce had said as to his future, and wondered whether, after all, she

had not miscalculated the strength, not the courage, of the knight whom she had selected to wear her colours in his helm in the great contest.

CHAPTER V.

WOOLGREAVES.

"You will be better when you have made the effort, mother," said Marian Ashurst to the widow, one day, when the beauty of the summer was at its height, and death and grief seemed very hard to bear, in the face of the unsympathising sunshine. "Don't think I underrate the effort, for indeed I don't, but you will be better when you have made it."

"Perhaps so, my dear," said Mrs. Ashurst, with reluctant submissiveness. "You are right; I am sure you always are right; but it is so little use to go to any place where one can't enjoy one's self, and where everybody must see that it is impossible; and you have—you know——" Her lips trembled, her voice broke. Her little hands, still soft and pretty, twined themselves together, with an expression of pain. Then she said no more.

Marian had been standing by the open window, looking out, the side of her head turned to her mother, who was glancing at her timidly. Now she crossed the room, with a quick steady step, and knelt down by Mrs. Ashurst's chair, clasping her hands upon the arm.

"Listen to me, dear," she said, with her clear eyes fixed on her mother's face, and her voice, though softened to a tone of the utmost tenderness, firm and decided. "You must never forget that I know exactly what and how much you feel, and that I share it all" (there was a forlornness in the girl's face which bore ample testimony to the truth of what she said) "when I tell you, in my practical way, what we must do. You remember, once,

then, you spoke to me about the Creswells, and I made light of them and their importance and influence. I would not admit it; I did not understand it. I had not fully thought about it then; but I admit it now. I understand it now, and it is my turn to tell you, my dearest mother, that we must be civil to them; we must take, or seem to take, their offers of kindness, of protection, of intimacy, as they are made. We cannot afford to do otherwise, and they are just the sort of people to be offended with us irreparably, if we did not allow them to extend their hospitality to us. It is rather officious, rather ostentatious; it has all the bitterness of making us remember more keenly what they *might* have done for us, but it *is* hospitality, and we need it; it *is* the promise of further services which we shall require urgently. You *must* rouse yourself, mother; this must be your share of helpfulness to me in the burden of our life. And, after all, what does it matter? What real difference does it make? My father is as much present to you and to me in one place as in another. Nothing can alter, or modify, or soften; nothing can deepen or embitter that truth. Come with me—the effort will repay itself."

Mrs. Ashurst had begun to look more resolved, before her daughter, who had spoken with more than her usual earnestness and decision, had come to an end of her argument. She put her arm round the girl's neck, and gave her a timid squeeze, and then half rose, as though she were ready to go with her, anywhere she chose, that very minute. Then Marian, without asking another word on the subject, busied herself about her mother's dress, arranging the widow's heavy sombre drapery with a deft hand, and talking about the weather, the pleasantness of their projected walk, and the daily dole of Helmingham gossip. Marian cared little for gossip of any kind herself, but it was a godsend to her sometimes, when she had particular reasons for not talking to her mother of the things that were in her mind, and did not find it easy to invent other things to talk to her about.

The object which Marian had in view just now, and which she had had some difficulty in attaining, was the inducing of her mother, who had passed the time since her bereavement in utter seclusion, to accept the invitation of Mr. Creswell, the owner of Woolgreaves, the local grandee *par excellence*, the person whose absence Marian had so lamented on the occasion of her father's illness, to pass "a long day" with him and his nieces. It was not the first time such an invitation had reached Mrs. Ashurst. Their rich neighbour, the dead schoolmaster's friend, had not been neglectful of the widow and her daughter, but it was the first time Marian had made up her mind that this advance on his part must be met and welcomed. She had as much reluctance to break through the seclusion of their life as her mother, though of a somewhat different stamp; but she had been pondering and calculating, while her mother had been only thinking and suffering, and she had decided that it must be done. She did not doubt that she should suffer more in the acting upon this decision than her mother; but it was made, and must be acted upon. So Marian took her mother to Woolgreaves. Mr. Creswell had offered to send a carriage (he rather liked the use of the indefinite article, which implied the extent of his establishment) to fetch the ladies, but Marian had declined this. The walk would do her mother good, and brace her nerves; she meant to talk to her easily, with seeming carelessness, of the possibilities of the future, on the way. At length Mrs. Ashurst was ready, and her daughter and she set forth, in the direction of the distressingly modern, but really imposing, mansion, which, for the first time, they approached, unsupported by him, in whose presence it had never occurred to them to suffer from any feeling of inferiority of position or means, or to believe that any one could regard them in a slighting manner.

Mr. Creswell, of Woolgreaves, had entertained a sincere regard, built on profound respect, for Mr. Ashurst. He knew the inferiority of his own mind, and his own education, to those of the man who had contentedly and

laboriously filled so humble a position—one so unworthy of his talents, as well as he knew the superiority of his own business abilities, the difference which had made him a rich man, and which would, under any circumstances, have kept Mr. Ashurst poor. He was a man possessed of much candour of mind and sound judgment; and though he preferred, quite sincerely, the practical ability which had made him what he was, and heartily enjoyed all the material advantages and pleasures of his life, he was capable of profound admiration for such unattainable things as taste, learning, and the indefinable moral and personal elements which combine to form a scholar and a gentleman. He was a commonplace man in every other respect than this, that he most sincerely despised and detested flattery, and was incapable of being deceived by it. He had not failed to understand that it would have been as impossible to James Ashurst to flatter as to rob him; and for this reason, as well as for the superiority he had so fully recognised, he had felt warm and abiding friendship for him, and lamented his death, as he had not mourned any accident of mortality since the day which had seen his pretty young wife laid in her early grave. Mr. Creswell, a poor man in those days, struggling manfully very far down on the ladder, which he had since climbed with the ease which not unfrequently attends effort, when something has happened to decrease the value of success, had loved his pretty, uneducated, merry little wife very much, and had felt for a while after she died, that he was not sure whether anything was worth working or striving for. But his constitutional activity of mind and body had got the better of that sort of feeling, and he had worked and striven to remarkably good purpose; but he had never asked another woman to share his fortunes.

This was not altogether occasioned by lingering regret for his pretty Jenny. He was not of a sentimental turn of mind, and he might even have been brought to acknowledge, reluctantly, that his wife would probably have been much out of place in the fine house, and at the head of the

luxurious establishment which his wealth had formed. She was humbly born, like himself, had not been ambitious, except of love and happiness, and had had no better education than enabled her to read and write, not so perfectly as to foster in her a taste for either occupation. If Mr. Creswell had a sorrowful remembrance of her sometimes, it died away with the reflection that she had been happy while she lived, and would not have been so happy now. His continued bachelor estate was occasioned rather by his close and engrossing attention to the interests of his business, and, perhaps, also to the narrow social circle in which he lived. Pretty, uneducated, simple young country women will retain their power of pleasing men who have acquired education, and made money, and so elevated themselves far above their original station; but the influence of education and wealth upon the tastes of men of this sort is inimical to the chances of the young women of the classes in society among which they habitually find their associates. The women of the "well-to-do" world are unattractive to those men, who have not been born in it. Such men either retain the predilections of their youth for women like those whose girlhood they remember, or cherish ambitious aspirations towards the inimitable, not to be borrowed or imported, refinement of the women of social spheres far above them.

The former was Mr. Creswell's case, in as far as anything except business can be said to have been active in his affairs. The "ladies" in the Helmingham district were utterly uninteresting to him, and he had made that fact so evident long ago that they had accepted it; of course regarding him as an "oddity," and much to be pitied; and since his nieces had taken up their abode, on the death of their father, Mr. Creswell's only brother, at Woolgreaves, a matrimonial development in Mr. Creswell's career had been regarded as an impossibility. The owner of Woolgreaves was voted by general feminine consent "a dear old thing," and a very good neighbour, and the ladies only hoped he might not have trouble before him with

"that pickle, young Tom," and were glad to think no poor woman had been induced to put herself in for such a life as that of Tom's step-mother would have been.

Mr. Creswell's only brother had belonged, not to the "well-to-do" community, but, on the contrary, to that of the "ne'er-do-weels," and he had died without a shilling, heavily in debt, and leaving two helpless girls—sufficiently delicately nurtured to feel their destitution with keenness amounting to despair, and sufficiently "fashionably," *i.e.* ill, educated to be wholly incapable of helping themselves—to the mercy of the world. The contemplation of this contingency, for which he had plenty of leisure, for he died of a lingering illness, did not appear to have distressed Tom Creswell. He had believed in "luck" all his life, with the touching devotion of a selfish man who defines "luck" as the making of things comfortable for himself, and is not troubled with visions of, after him, the modern version of the deluge, which takes the squalid form of the pawnbroker's and the poor-house; and "luck" had lasted his time. It had even survived him, so far as his children were concerned, for his brother, who had quarrelled with him, more from policy and of deliberate interest, regarding him as a hopeless spendthrift, the helping of whom was a useless extravagance, than from anger or disgust, came to the aid of the widow and her children, when he found that things were very much worse than he had supposed they would prove to be.

Mrs. Tom Creswell afforded a living example of her husband's "luck." She was a mild, gentle, very silly, very self-denying, estimable woman, who loved the "ne'er-do-weel" so literally with all her heart that when he died she had not enough of that organ left to go on living with. She did not see why she should try, and she did not try, but quietly died in a few months, to the astonishment of rational people, who declared that Tom Creswell was a "good loss," and had never been of the least use either to himself or any other human being. What on earth was the woman about? Was she such an idiot as not to see his

faults? Did she not know what a selfish, idle, extravagant, worthless fellow he was, and that he had left her to either pauperism or dependence on any one who would support her, quite complacently? If such a husband as *he* was—what she had seen in him beyond his handsome face and his pleasant manner, *they* could not tell—was to be honoured in this way, gone quite daft about, in fact, they really could not perceive the advantage to men in being active, industrious, saving, prudent, and domestic. Nothing could be more true, more reasonable, more unanswerable, or more ineffectual. Mrs. Tom Creswell did not dispute it; she patiently endured much bullying by strong-minded, tract-dropping females of the spinster persuasion; she was quite satisfied to be told she had proved herself unworthy of a better husband. She did not murmur as it was proved to her, in the fiercest forms of accurate arithmetic, that her Tom had squandered sums which might have provided for her and her children decently, and had not even practised the poor self-denial of paying for an insurance on his life. She contradicted no one, she rebuked no one, she asked forbearance and pity from no one; she merely wept and said she was sure her brother-in-law would be kind to the girls, and that she would not like to be a trouble to Mr. Creswell herself, and was sure her Tom would not have liked her to be a trouble to Mr. Creswell.

On this point the brother of the "departed saint," as the widow called the amiable idler of whose presence she considered the world unworthy, by no means agreed with her. Mr. Creswell was of opinion that so long as trouble kept clear of Tom, Tom would have been perfectly indifferent as to where it lighted. But he did not say so. He had not much respect for his sister-in-law's intellect, but he pitied her, and he was not only generous to her distress, but also merciful to her weakness. He offered her a home at Woolgreaves, and it was arranged that she should "try" to go there, after a while. But she never tried, and she never went; she "did not see the good of" anything; and in six months after Tom Creswell's death

his daughters were settled at Woolgreaves, and it is doubtful whether the state of orphanhood was ever in any case a more tempered, modified misfortune than in theirs.

Thus the family party at the handsome house, which Mrs. Ashurst and her daughter were about to visit, was composed of Mr. Creswell, his son Tom, a specimen of the schoolboy class, of whom this history has already afforded a glimpse, and the Misses Creswell, the Maude and Gertrude of whom Marian had, in her grief, spoken in terms of sharp and contemptuous disparagement which, though not entirely censurable, judged from her point of view, were certainly not altogether deserved.

Mr. Creswell earnestly desired to befriend the visitor and her daughter. Gertrude Creswell thought it would be very "nice" to be "great friends" with that clever Miss Ashurst, and had, with all the impulsiveness of generous girlhood, exulted in the idea of being, in her turn, able to extend kindness to people in need of it, even as she and her sister had been. But Maude, who, though her actual experience of life had been identical with her sister's, had more natural intuition and caution, checked the enthusiasm with which Gertrude drew this picture.

"We must be very careful, Gerty dear," she said; "I fancy this clever Miss Ashurst is very proud. People say you never find out the nature of any one until trouble brings it to the light. It would never do to let her think one had any notion of doing her services, you know. She might not like it from us; uncle's kindness to them is a different thing; but we must remember that *we* are, in reality, no better off than she is."

Gertrude reddened. She had not spoken with the remotest idea of patronage of Miss Ashurst in her mind, and her sister's warning pained her. Gertrude had a dash of her father's *insouciance* in her, though in him it had been selfish joviality, and in her it was only happy thoughtlessness. It had occurred to Gertrude, more than once before to-day, to think she should like to be married to some one

whom she could love very much indeed, and away from this fine place, which did not belong to them, though her uncle was very kind, in a home of her own. Maude had a habit of saying and looking things which made Gertrude entertain such notions; and now she had, with the best intentions, injured her pleasure in the anticipation of the visit of Mrs. Ashurst and Marian.

It was probably this little incident which lent the slight touch of coldness and restraint to the manner of Gertrude Creswell which Marian instantly felt, and which she erroneously interpreted. When they had met formerly, there had been none of this hesitating formality.

"These girls don't want us here," said Marian to herself; "they grudge us their uncle's friendship, lest it should take a form which would deprive them of any of his money."

Perhaps Marian was not aware of the resolve lurking in her heart even then, that such was precisely the form which that friendship should be made to take. The evil warp in her otherwise frank and noble mind told in this. Gertrude Creswell, to whom in particular she imputed mercenary feeling, and the forethought of a calculating jealousy, was entirely incapable of anything of the kind, and was actuated wholly by her dread that Marian should misinterpret any premature advance towards intimacy on her part as an impertinence. Thus the foundation of a misunderstanding between the two was laid.

Marian's thoughts had been busy with the history of the sisters, as she and her mother approached Woolgreaves. She had heard her father describe Tom Creswell and his wife, and dwell upon the fortunate destiny which had transferred Maude and Gertrude to their uncle's care. She thought of all that now with bitterness. The contrast between her father's character, life, and fate, and the character, life, and fate of Tom Creswell, was a problem difficult to solve, hard to endure. Why had the measure been so differently—she would, she *must* say so unjustly—meted to these two men? Her fancy dwelt on every point

in that terrible difference, lingered around the two death-beds, pictured the happy, sheltered, luxurious, unearned security of those whom the spendthrift had left uncared for, and the harsh, gloomy future before her mother and herself, in which only two things, hard work and scanty means, were certain, which had been the vision her father must have seen of the fate of those he loved, when he, so fitted to adorn an honoured and conspicuous position, had died, worn out in the long vain strife with poverty. Here were the children of the man who had lived utterly for self, and the widow and child of the "righteous," who had done his duty manfully from first to last. Hard and bitter were Marian's reflections on this contrast, and earnestly did she wish that some speedy means of accelerating by efforts of her own the fulfilment of those promises of Providence, in which she felt sometimes tempted to put little faith, might arise.

"I suppose he was not exactly 'forsaken,'" said the girl in her mind as she approached the grand gates of Woolgreaves, whose ironmongery displayed itself in the utmost profusion, allied with artistic designs more sumptuous than elegant, "and that no one will see us 'begging our bread;' but there is only meagre consolation to me in this, since he had not what might—or all their service is a pretence, all their 'opinions' are lies—have saved him, and I see little to rejoice in in being just above the begging of bread."

"They have done a great deal to the place since we were here, Marian," said Mrs. Ashurst, looking round admiringly upon the skilful gardening and rich display of shrubs and flowers and outdoor decorations of all kinds. "It must take a great many hands to keep this in order Not so much as a leaf or a pebble out of its place."

"They say there are four gardeners always employed," said Marian. "I wish we had the money it costs; we needn't wish Midsummer-day further off then. But here is Mr. Creswell, coming to meet us."

Marian Ashurst was much more attractive in her early

womanhood than she had promised to be as a very young girl, and the style of her face and figure was of the kind which is assisted in its effect by a somewhat severe order of costume. She was not beautiful, not even positively handsome, and it is possible she might have looked commonplace in the ordinary dress of young women of limited means, where cheap material and coarse colouring must necessarily be used. In her plain attire of deep mourning, with no ornament save one or two trinkets of jet which had been her mother's, Marian Ashurst looked far from commonplace, and remarkably ladylike. The strongly defined character in her face, the composure of her manner, the quietness of her movements, were not the charms which are usually associated with youth, but they were charms, and her host was a person to whom they were calculated to prove especially charming. Except in his generally benevolent way of entertaining a kindly regard for his friend's daughter, Mr. Creswell had never noted nor taken any particular notice of Marian Ashurst; but she had not been an hour in his house before she impressed herself upon him as being very different from all the other girls of his acquaintance, and much more interesting than his nieces.

Mr. Creswell felt rather annoyed with his nieces. They were civil, certainly; but they did not seem to understand the art of making the young lady who was visiting them happy and "at home." There was none of the freemasonry of "the young person" about them. After a while, Mr. Creswell found that the order of things he had been prepared for—what he certainly would have taken to be the natural order of things—was altered, set aside, he did not know how, and that he was walking along the trim garden-paths, after luncheon, with Miss Ashurst, while Maude and Gertrude took charge of the visitor to whom he had meant to devote himself, and were making themselves as amiable and pleasant to her as they had failed to make themselves to Marian. Perhaps the fault or the reason was as much on Miss Ashurst's side

as on theirs. Before he had conducted his visitor over all the "show" portions of the grounds and gardens, Mr. Creswell had arrived at the conclusion that Marian was a remarkable young woman, with strong powers of observation, and a decided aptitude for solid and sensible conversation, which probably explained the coldness towards her of Maude and Gertrude, who were not remarkable, except for fine complexions, and hair to correspond, and whose talk was of the most vapid description, so far as he had had the opportunity of observing.

There was not much of importance in appearance to relate about the occurrences of a day which was destined to be remembered as very important by all who passed its hours at Woolgreaves. It had the usual features of a "long day," spasmodic attacks of animation and lapses of weariness, a great deal of good eating and drinking, much looking at pictures and parade-books, some real gratification, and not a little imperfectly disguised fatigue. It differed in one respect, however, from the usual history of a "long day." There was one person who was not glad when it came to an end. That person was Mr. Creswell.

Poor Mrs. Ashurst had found her visit to Woolgreaves much more endurable than she expected. She had indeed found it almost pleasurable. She had been amused—the time had passed, the young ladies had been kind to her. She praised them to Marian.

"They are nice creatures," she said; "really tender-hearted and sincere. Of course, they are not clever like you, my dear; but then all girls cannot be expected to be *that*."

"They are very fortunate," said Marian, moodily. "Just think of the safe and happy life they lead. Living like that *is* living; *we* only exist. They have no want for the present; no anxiety for the future. Everything they see and touch, all the food they eat, everything they wear means money.'

"Yes," said Mrs. Ashurst; "and after all, money is a great thing. Not, indeed," she added, with tears in her

eyes, "that I could care much for it now, for it could not, if we had it, restore what we have lost."

"No," said Marian, frowning, "but it could have saved us from losing it; it could have preserved love and care, home, position, and happiness to us. True, mother, money is a great thing."

But Marian's mother was not listening to her. Her mind had returned to its familiar train of thought again.

Something had been said that day about Mrs. Ashurst's paying Woolgreaves a longer visit, going for a week or two, of course accompanied by Marian. Mrs. Ashurst had not decidedly accepted or negatived the proposition. She felt rather nervous about it herself, and uncertain as to Marian's sentiments, and her daughter had not aided her by word or look. Nor did Marian recur to the subject when she found themselves at home again in the evening. But she remembered it, and discussed it with herself in the night. Would it be well that her mother should be habituated to the comforts, the luxuries of such a house, so unattainable to her at home, so desirable in her state of broken health and spirits? This was the great difficulty which beset Marian, and she felt she could not decide it then.

Her long waking reverie of that night did not concern itself with the people she had been with. It was fully occupied with the place. Her mind mounted from floor to floor of the handsome house, which represented so much money, reviewing and appraising the furniture, speculating on the separate and collective value of the plate, the mirrors, the hangings, the decorations. Thousands and thousands of pounds, she thought, hundreds and hundreds of times more money than she had ever seen, and nothing to do for it all. Those girls who lived among it, what had they done that they should have all of it? Why had she, whose mother needed it so much, who could so well appreciate it, none of it? Marian's last thought before she fell asleep that night was, not only that money was a great thing, but that almost anything would be worth doing to get money.

CHAPTER VI.

BREAD-SEEKING.

THERE are few streets in London better known to that large army of martyrs, the genteelly poor, than those which run northward from the Strand, and are lost in the two vast tracts of brick known under the name of Covent Garden and Drury Lane. Lodging-house keepers do not affect these streets, preferring the narrow no-thoroughfares on the other side of the Strand, abutting on the river, streets eternally ringing with the hoarse voice of the costermonger, who descends on one side and ascends on the other, eternally echoing to the grinding of the organ-man, who gets through his entire *répertoire* twice over during his progress to the railing overlooking the Embankment, and his return to the pickle-shop at the top, eternally haunted by the beer-boy and the newspaper-boy, by postmen infuriated with wrongly addressed letters, and by luggage-laden cabs. In the streets bearing northward no costermonger screams and no organ is found; the denizens are business-people, and would very soon put a stop to any such attempt.

Business, and nothing but business, in that drab-coloured house with the high wire-blinds in the window, over which you can just catch a glimpse of the top of a hanging white robe. Cope and Son are the owners of the drab-coloured house, and Cope and Son are the largest retailers of clerical millinery in London. All day long members of "the cloth," sleek, pale, emaciated, high-church curates, stout, fresh-coloured, huge-whiskered, broad-church rectors, fat, pasty-faced, straight-haired evangelical ministers, are pouring into Cope and Son's for clothes, for hoods, for surplices, for stoles, for every variety of ecclesiastical garment. Cope and Son supply all, in every variety, for every sect; the M.B. waistcoat

and stiff-collared coat reaching to his heels in which the Honourable and Reverend Cyril Genuflex looks so imposing, as he, before the assembled vestry, defies the scrutiny of his evangelical churchwarden; the pepper-and-salt cutaway in which the Reverend Pytchley Quorn follows the hounds; the black-stuff gown in which the Reverend Locock Congreve perspires and groans as he deals out denunciations of those sitting under him; and the purple bedgown, turned up with yellow satin, and worked all over with crosses and vagaries, in which poor Tom Phoole, such a kind-hearted and such a soft-headed vessel, goes through his ritualistic tricks,—all these come from the establishment of Cope and Son's, in Rutland Street, Strand.

The next house on the right is handy for the high-church clergymen, though the evangelicals shut their eyes and turn away their heads as they pass by it. Here Herr Tubelkahn, from Elberfeld, the cunning worker in metals, the artificer of brass and steel and iron, and sometimes of gold and silver, the great ecclesiastical upholsterer, has set up his Lares and Penates, and here he deals in the loveliest of mediævalisms and the choicest of renaissance wares. The sleek long-coated gentry who come to make purchases can scarcely thread their way through the heterogeneous contents of Herr Tubelkahn's shop. All massed together without order; black oaken chairs, bought up by Tubelkahn's agents from occupants of tumbledown old cottages in midland districts, crosiers and crucifixes, ornate and plain, from Elberfeld, sceptres and wands from Solingen, lecterns in the shape of enormous brazen eagles with outstretched wings from Birmingham, enormous candelabra and gaseliers of Gothic pattern from Liège, and sculptured pulpits and carved altar-rails from the Curtain Road, Shoreditch. Altar-cloths hang from the tables, and altar-carpets, none of your common loom-woven stuff, but hand-worked and—as Herr Tubelkahn gives you to understand—by the fairest fingers, are spread about to show their patterns to the

best advantage, while there is so much stained glass about ready for immediate transfer to the oriel windows of country churches, that when the sun shines, Herr Tubelkahn's customers seem to be suddenly invested with Joseph's garment of many colours, and the whole shop lights up like a kaleidoscope.

Many of the customers, both of Messrs. Cope and Tubelkahn, were customers, or, more euphuistically, clients, of Messrs. Camoxon, who kept the celebrated Clerical and Educational Registry higher up the street; but these customers and clients invariably crossed and recrossed the road, in proceeding from the one to the other of these establishments, in order to avoid a certain door which lay midway between them. A shabby swing-door, sun-blistered, and with its bottom panel scored with heel and toe kicks from impatient entrance-seeking feet; a door flanked by two flaming bills, and surrounded by a host of close-shaven, sallow-faced men, in shabby clothes and shiny hats, and red noses and swinging canes, noble Romans, roistering cavaliers, clamorous citizens, fashionable guests, virtuous peasants—all at a shilling a night; for the door was, in fact, the stage-door of the Cracksideum Theatre. The shabby men in threadbare jauntiness smiled furtively, and grinned at each other as they saw the sleek gentlemen in shining broad-cloth step out of their path; but the said gentlemen felt the proximity of the Thespian temple very acutely, and did not scruple to say so to Messrs. Camoxon, who, as in duty bound, shrugged their shoulders deprecatingly, and—changed the conversation. They were very sorry, but—and they shrugged their shoulders. When men shrug their shoulders to their customers it is time that they should retire from business. It was time that the Messrs. Camoxon so retired, for the old gentleman now seldom appeared in Rutland Street, but remained at home at Wimbledon, enacting his favourite character of the British squire, and actually dressing the part in a blue coat and gilt buttons, gray knee-breeches, and Hessian boots; while young George

Camoxon hunted with the Queen's hounds, had dined twice at the Life Guards' mess at Windsor, and had serious thoughts of standing for the county.

But the business was far too good to give up; every one who had a presentation or an advowson to sell took it to Camoxons'; the head clerk could tell you off-hand the net value of every valuable living in England, the age of the incumbent, and the state of his health. Every rector who wanted assistance, every curate who wanted a change, in servants' phrase, "to better himself," every layman who wanted a title for orders, every vicar who, oddly enough, wanted to change a dull, bleak living in the north for a pleasant social sphere of duty in a cheerful neighbourhood in the south of England; parents on the look-out for tutors, tutors in search of pupils—all inscribed their names on Camoxon's books, and looked to him for assistance in their extremity. There was a substantial, respectable, orthodox appearance about Camoxons', in the ground-glass windows, with the device of the Bible and Sceptre duly inscribed thereon; in the chaste internal fittings of polished mahogany and plain horsehair stools, with the Churchman's Almanack on the wall in mediæval type, very illegible, and in a highly mediæval frame, all bosses and clamps; in the big ledgers and address-books, and in the Post-office Directory, which here shed its truculent red cover, and was scarcely recognisable in a meek sad-coloured calf binding; and, above all, in the grave, solemn, sable-clad clerks, who moved noiselessly about, and who looked like clergymen playing at business.

Up and down Rutland Street had Walter Joyce paced full a thousand times since his arrival in London. The name of the street and of its principal inhabitants was familiar to him through the advertisements in the clerical newspaper which used to be sent to Mr. Ashurst at Helmingham; and no sooner was he settled down in his little lodging in Winchester Street than he crossed the mighty artery of the Strand, and sought out the street

and the shops of which he had already heard so much. He saw them, peered in at Copes', and at Tubelkahn's, and looked earnestly at Camoxons' ground-glass window, and half thought of going in to see whether they had anything which might suit him on their books. But he refrained until he had received the answers to a certain advertisement which he had inserted in the newspaper, setting forth that a young man with excellent testimonials —he knew he could get them from the rector of Helmingham—was desirous of giving instruction in the classics and mathematics. Advertising, he thought, was a better and more gentlemanly medium than causing a detailed list of his accomplishments to be inscribed in the books of the Ecclesiastical Registry, as a horse's pedigree and performances are entered in the horsedealer's list; but when, after hunting for half an hour through the columns of the newspaper's supplement, he found his advertisement amongst a score of others, all of them from men with college honours, or promising greater advantages than he could hold forth, he began to doubt the wisdom of his proceeding. However, he would wait and see the result. He did so wait for three days, but not a single line addressed, as requested, to W. J. found its way to Winchester Street. Then he sent for the newspaper again, and began to reply to the advertisements which he thought might suit him. He had no high thoughts or hopes, no notions of regenerating the living generation, or of placing tuition on a new footing, or rendering it easy by some hitherto unexplained process. He had been an usher in a school; for the place of an usher in a school he had advertised; and if he could have obtained that position he would have been contented. But when the few answers to his advertisement arrived, he saw that it was impossible to accept any of the offers they contained. One man wanted him to teach French with a guaranteed Parisian accent, to devote his whole time out of school-hours to the boys, to supervise them in the Indian-sceptre athletic exercises, and to rule over a dormitory of thirteen,

"where, in consequence of the lax supervision of the last didaskolos, severe measures would be required," for twenty pounds a year. Another gentleman, whose note-paper was ornamented with a highly florid Maltese cross, and who dated his letter "Eve of S. Boanerges," wished to know his opinion of the impostor-firebrand M. Luther, and whether he (the advertiser) had any connections in the florist or decorative line, with whom an arrangement in the mutual-accommodation way could be entered into; while a third, evidently a grave sententious man, with a keen eye to business, expressed, on old-fashioned Bath-post, gilt-edged letter-paper, his desire to know "what sum W. J. would be willing to contribute for the permission to state, after a year's residence, that he had been one of Dr. Sumph's most trusted helpmates and assistants."

No good to be got that way, then, and a visit to Camoxons' imminent, for the money was running very, very short, and the conventional upturning of stones, by no means leaving one in its normal position, must be proceeded with. Visit to Camoxon's paid, after much staring through the ground-glass window (opaque generally, but transparent in the Bible and Sceptre artistic bits), much ascent and descent of two steps cogitatively, final rush up top step wildly, and hurried, not to say pantomimic, entrance through the ground-glass door, to be confronted by the oldest and most composed of the sable-clad clerks. Bows exchanged; name and address required; name and address given in a low and serious whisper, and repeated aloud in a clear high treble, each word as it was uttered being transcribed in a hand which was the very essence of copperplate into an enormous book. Position required? Second or third mastership in a classical school, private tutorship, as secretary or librarian to a nobleman or gentleman. So glibly ran the old gentleman's steel pen over these items that Walter Joyce began to fancy that applicants for one post were generally ready and willing to take all or any, as indeed they were. "Which University, what college?" The old gentleman

scratched his head with the end of his steel penholder, and looked across at Walter, with a benevolent expression which seemed to convey that he would rather the young man would say Christchurch than St. Mary's, and Trinity in preference to Clare Hall. Walter Joyce grew hot to his ear-tips, and his tongue felt too large for his mouth, as he stammered out, "I have not been to either University —I——" but the remainder of the sentence was lost in the loud bang with which the old gentleman clapped-to the heavy sides of the big book, clasped it with its brazen clasp, and hoisted it on to a shelf behind him with the dexterity of a juggler.

"My good young friend," said the old clerk blandly, "you might have saved yourself a vast amount of vexation, and me a certain amount of trouble, if you had made that announcement earlier! Good morning!"

"But do you mean to say——"

"I mean to say that in that book at the present moment are the names of sixty gentlemen seeking just the employment which you have named, all of whom are not merely members of colleges, but members who have taken rank—prizemen, first-class men, wranglers, senior optimes; they are on our books, and they may remain there for months before we get them off. You may judge, then, what chance you would have. At most agencies they would have taken your money and given you hope. But we don't do that here—it isn't our way. Good morning!"

"Then you think I have no chance——"

"I'm sure of it—through us, at least. Good morning!"

Joyce would have made another effort, but the old gentleman had already turned on his heel, and feigned to be busy with some letters on a desk before him, so Walter turned round too, and silently left the registry-office.

Silently, and with an aching heart. The old clerk had said but little, but Walter felt that his dictum was correct, and that all hopes of getting a situation as a tutor were at an end. Oh, if his father had only left him money enough

to go to college, he would have had a future before him which—— But then, Marian? He would never have known that pure, faithful, earnest love, failing which, life in its brightest and best form would have been dull and distasteful to him. He had that love still, thank Heaven, and in that thought there were the elements of hope, and the promptings to bestir himself yet once more in his hard, self-appointed task of bread-winning.

Money running very short, and time running rapidly on. Not the shortest step in advance since he had first set foot in London, and the bottom of his purse growing painfully visible. He had taken to frequenting a small coffee-house in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, where, as he munched the roll and drank the tea which now too often served him as a dinner, he could read the newspapers, and scan the advertisements to see if there were anything likely to suit him among the myriad columns. It was a quiet and secluded little place, where but few strangers entered; he saw the same faces night after night, as he noticed—and where he could have his letters addressed to him under his initials, which was a great comfort, as he had noticed lately that his landlady in his riverside lodging-house had demurred to the receipt of so much initialed correspondence, ascribing it, as Walter afterwards learned from the "slavey," or maid-of-all-work, either to "castin' 'orryscopes, tellin' charickters by 'and-writin', or rejen'rative bolsum for the 'air!"—things utterly at variance with the respectability of her establishment.

A quiet, secluded little place, sand-floored and spittoon-decorated, with a cosy clock, and a cosy red-faced fire, singing with steaming kettles, and cooking chops, and frizzling bacon, with a sleepy cat, a pet of the customers, dozing before the hearth, and taking occasional quarter-of-an-hour turns round the room, to be back-rubbed and whisker-scratched, and tit-bit fed, with tea and coffee and cocoa, in thick blue china half-pint mugs, and with bacon in which the edge was by no means to be cut off and thrown

away, but was thick, and crisp, and delicious as the rest of it, on willow-pattern plates, with little yellow pats of country butter, looking as if the cow whose impressed form they bore had only fed upon buttercups, as different from the ordinary petrified cold cream which in London passes current for butter as chalk from cheese. "Bliffkins's"—the house was supposed to have been leased to Bliffkins as the Elephant, and appeared under that title in the Directories; but no one knew it but as Bliffkins's—was a Somersetshire house, and kept a neat placard framed and glazed in its front window to the effect that the *Somerset County Gazette* was taken in. So that among the thin, pale London folk who "used" the house you occasionally came upon stalwart giants, big-chested, horny-handed, deep-voiced, with z's sticking out all over their pronunciation, jolly Zummerzetshire men, who brought Bliffkins the latest gossip from his old native place of Bruton and its neighbourhood, and who, during their stay—and notably at cattle-show period—were kings of the house. At ordinary times, however, the frequenters of the house never varied—indeed, it was understood that Bliffkins's was a "connection," and did not in the least depend upon chance custom. Certain people sat in certain places, ordered certain refreshment, and went away at certain hours, never varying in the slightest particular. Mr. Byrne, a wizened old man, who invariably bore on his coat and on his hair traces of fur and fluff and wool, who was known to be a bird-stuffer by trade, and an extreme Radical in politics, and who was reputed to be the writer of some of those spirit-stirring letters in the weekly press signed "Lucius Junius Brutus" and "Scrutator," sat in the right-hand corner box nearest the door, where he was out of the draught, and had the readiest chance of pouncing upon the boy who brought in the evening papers, and securing them before his rival, Mr. Wickwar, could effect a seizure. Mr. Wickwar, who was a retired tailor, and had plenty of means, the sole bane of his life being the danger to the Constitution from the

recklessly advanced feeling of the times, sat at the other end of the room, being gouty and immobile, contented himself with glaring at his democratic enemy, and occasionally withering him with choice extracts from the *Magna Charta* weekly journal. The box between them was usually devoted of an evening to Messrs. O'Shane and Begson, gentlemen attached to the press, capital company, full of anecdote and repartee, though liable to be suddenly called away in the exigence of their literary pursuits. The top of the policeman's helmet or the flat cap of the fireman on duty just protruded through the swing-door in this direction acted as tocsins to these indefatigable public servants, cut them off in the midst of a story, and sent them flying on the back of an engine, or at the tail of a crowd, to witness scenes which, portrayed by their graphic pencils, afforded an additional relish to the morning muffin at thousands of respectable breakfast-tables. Between these gentlemen and a Mr. Shimmer, a youngish man, with bright eyes, hectic colour, and a general sense of nervous irritation, there was a certain spirit of *camaraderie* which the other frequenters of Bliffkins's could not understand. Mr. Shimmer invariably sat alone, and during his meal habitually buried himself in one of the choice volumes of Bliffkins's library, consisting of old volumes of Blackwood's, Bentley's, and Tait's magazines, from which he would occasionally make extracts in a very small hand in a very small note-book. It was probably from the fact of a printer's boy having called at Bliffkins's with what was understood to be a "proof," that a rumour arose and was received throughout the Bliffkins's connection that Mr. Shimmer edited the *Times* newspaper. Be that as it might, there was no doubt, both from external circumstances and from the undefined deference paid to him by the other gentlemen of the press, that Mr. Shimmer was a literary man of position, and that Bliffkins held him in respect, and, what was more practical for him, gave him credit on that account. An ex-parish clerk, who took snuff and sleep in alternate pinches; a potato salesmen in Covent Garden, who drank coffee to

keep himself awake, and who went briskly off to business when the other customers dropped off wearily to bed; a "professional" at an adjoining bowling-alley, who would have been a pleasant fellow had it not been for his biceps, which got into his head and into his mouth, and pervaded his conversation; and a seedsman, a terrific republican, who named his innocent bulbs and hyacinths after the most sanguinary heroes of the French revolution,—filled up the list of Bliffkins's "regulars."

Among these quiet people Walter Joyce took up his place night after night, until he began to be looked upon as of and belonging to them. They were intolerant of strangers at Bliffkins's, of strangers, that is to say, who, tempted by the comforts of the place, renewed their visits, and threatened to make them habitual. These were for the most part received at about their third appearance, when they came in with a pleasant smile and thought they had made an impression, with a strong stare and a dead silence, under the influences of which they ordered refreshment which they did not want, had to pay for, and went away without eating, amid the contemptuous grins of the regulars. But Walter Joyce was so quiet and unobtrusive, so evidently a gentleman desirous of peace and shelter and refuge at a cheap rate, that the great heart of Bliffkins's softened to him at once; they themselves had known the feelings under which he sought the asylum of that Long-Acre Patmos, and they respected him. No one spoke to him, there was no acknowledgment of his presence among them; they knew well enough that any such manifestation would have been out of place; but when, after finishing his very simple evening meal, he would take a few sheets of paper from his pocket, draw to him the *Times* supplement, and, constantly referring to it, commence writing a series of letters, they knew what all that portended, and all of them, including old Wickwar, the ex-tailor and great Conservative, silently wished him Godspeed.

Ah, those letters, dated from Bliffkins's coffee-house, and

written in Walter Joyce's roundest hand, in reply to the hundred of chances which each day's newspaper-sheet offered to every enterprising bread-seeker, chances so promising at the first glance, so barren and so full of rottenness when they came to be tested! Clerkships? clerkships in galore! legal, mercantile, general clerks were wanted everywhere, only apply to A. B. or Y. Z., and take them! But when A. B. or Y. Z. replied, Walter Joyce found that the legal clerks must write the regular engrossing hand, must sweep out the office ready for the other clerks by nine a.m., and must remain there occasionally till nine p.m., with a little outdoor work in the service of writs and notices of ejectment. The duties required of the mercantile clerk were but little better, and those of the general clerks were worst of all, while throughout a net income of eighteen shillings a week appeared to be the average remuneration. "A secretary wanted?" certainly, four secretaries wanted nearly every day, to public companies which were about to bring forth an article in universal demand, but of which the supply had hitherto been limited, and which could not fail to meet with an enormous success and return a large dividend. In all cases the secretary must be a man of education and of gentlemanly manners, so said the advertisements; but the reply to Walter Joyce's application said in addition that he must be able to advance the sum of three hundred pounds, to be invested in the shares of the company, which would bear interest at the rate of twenty-five per cent. per annum. The Press? through the medium of their London fraternity the provincial press was clamorous for educated men who could write leading articles, general articles, and reviews; but on inquiry the press required the same educated men to be able to combine shorthand reporting with editorial writing, and in many cases suggested the advisability of the editorial writer being able to set up his own leaders in type at case. The literary institutions throughout the country were languishing for lecturers; but when Walter Joyce wrote to them, offering them a choice of

certain subjects which he had studied, and on which he thought himself competent of conveying real information, he received answers from the secretaries, that only men of name were paid by the institutions, but that the committee would be happy to set apart a night for him if he chose to lecture gratis, or that if he felt inclined to address the inhabitants of Knuckleborough on his own account, the charge for the great hall was three pounds, for the smaller hall thirty shillings a night, in both cases exclusive of gas, while the secretary, who kept the principal stationer's shop and library in the town, would be happy to become his agent, and sell his tickets at the usual charge of ten per cent. Four pounds a week, guaranteed! Not a bad income for a penniless man! to be earned, too, in the discharge of a light and gentlemanly occupation, to be acquired by the outlay of three shillings' worth of postage stamps. Walter Joyce sent the postage stamps, and received in return a lithographic circular, very dirty about the folded edges, instructing him in the easiest method of modelling wax flowers!

That was the final straw. On the receipt of that letter, or rather on the reading of it—he had taken it from the stately old looking-glass over the fireplace to the box where of late he usually sat—Walter Joyce gave a deep groan, and buried his face in his hands. A minute after he felt his hair slightly touched, and looking up, saw old Jack Byrne bending over him.

"What ails ye, lad?" asked the old man tenderly.

"Misery—despair—starvation!"

"I thought so!" said the old man calmly. Then taking a small battered flask from his breast and emptying its contents into a clean cup before him—"Here, drink this, and come outside. We can't talk here!"

Walter swallowed the contents of the cup mechanically, and followed his new friend into the street.

CHAPTER VII.

A NEW FRIEND.

When they stood in the street, with the fresh night-wind blowing upon them, the old man stopped, and, peering anxiously into his companion's face, said abruptly—

"Better?"

"Much better, thank you; quite well, in fact. There's no occasion for me to trouble you any more; I——"

"What? All gaff, eh? Old Jack Byrne sold, eh? Swallowed his brandy, and want to cut—is that the caper?"

"I beg your pardon, I don't quite clearly understand you, I'm sorry to say"—for Walter knew by the tone of his voice that the old man was annoyed—"I'm very weak and rather stupid—I mean to say, in—in the ways and the talk of London—and I don't clearly follow what you said to me just now; only you were so kind to me at first, that——"

"Provinces!" muttered the old man to himself. "Just like me; treating him to my pavement patter, and thinking he understood it! All right, I think, as far as one can judge, though God knows that's often wrong enough!" Then, aloud, "Kind! nonsense! I'm an odd old skittle, and talk an odd language; but I've seen the ups and downs of life, my lad, and can give you good advice if I can't give anything else. Have you anything to do to-night? Nothing? Sure I'm not keeping you from the Opera, or any swell party in Park Lane? No! Then come home with me and have a bit o' pickled salmon and a glass of cold gin-and-water, and let's talk matters out."

Before he had concluded his sentence, the old man had slipped Joyce's arm through his own, and was making off at a great rate, and also with an extraordinary shamble, in which his shoulder appeared to act as a kind of cutwater,

while his legs followed considerably in the rear. Walter held on to him as best he could, and in this fashion they made their way through the back streets, across St. Martin's Lane, and so into Leicester Square. Then, as they arrived in front of a brilliantly lighted establishment, at the door of which cabs laden with fashionably dressed men and gaudily dressed women were continually disgorging their loads, while a never-ceasing stream of pedestrians poured in from the street, Jack Byrne came to a sudden halt, and said to his companion—

"Now I'm going to enjoy myself!"

Walter Joyce had noticed the style of people pouring in through the turnstiles and paying their admission money at the brilliantly lit boxes; and as he heard these words he unconsciously drew back. You see, he was but a country-bred young man, and had not yet been initiated into the classical enjoyments of London life. Jack Byrne felt the tug at his arm, and looked at him curiously.

"What is it?" said he. "You thought I was going in there? I? Oh, my dear young friend, you'll have to learn a great deal yet; but you're on the suspicious lay, and that's a chalk to you! You thought I'd hocussed the brandy I gave you at Bliffkins's; you thought I was going to take you into this devil's crib, did you? Not I, my dear boy; I'd as soon take you in as myself, and that's saying a good deal. No; I told you I was going to enjoy myself—so I am. My enjoyment is in watching that door, and marking those who go through it, not in speculating on what's going on inside, but in waiting for the end, my young friend—in waiting for the end! Oh yes, jump out of your brougham, my Lord Tomnoddy; but don't split your lavender gloves in attempting to close the door behind you—the cad will do that, of course! Beautiful linen, white as snow, and hair all stuck close to his head, look. But mark his forehead—what's your name—Joyce? Mark his forehead, Joyce; see how it slopes straight away back. Look at that noble space between his nose and his

upper lip—the ape type, my friend—the ape type! That's one of your hereditary rulers, Joyce, my boy! That fellow sits and votes for you and me, bless him! He's gone in now to improve his mind with the literature of comic songs, and the legs of the ballet, and the fascinations of painted Jezebels, and to clear his brain with drinks of turpentine and logwood shavings! And that's one of our hereditary legislators! Oh, Lord, how much longer —how much longer!"

The policeman on duty at the door, whose mission it was to keep the pathway clear, now sallied forth from the portico and promenaded in the little crowd, gently pushing his way amongst them with a monotonous cry of "Move on, there, please—move on!" Joyce noticed that his companion regarded this policeman with a half-defiant, half-pitying air, and the old man said to him, as they resumed their walk—

"That's another of the effects of our blessed civilization! That gawk in blucher boots and a felt helmet—that machine in a shoddy great-coat, who can scarcely tell B from a bull's foot, and yet has the power to tell you and me and other men, who pay for the paving-rate—ay, and for the support of such scum as he is, for the matter of that—to move on! Suppose you think I'm a rum un, eh?" said Mr. Byrne, suddenly changing his voice of disgust into a bantering tone. "Not seen many like me before; don't want to see any more, perhaps?"

"I don't say that," said Joyce, with a half smile; "but I confess the sentiments are new to me, and——"

"Brought up in the country; my lord or the squire, eh? So pleased to receive notice coming out of church, 'plucks the slavish hat from the villager's head,' and all that! Sorry I've not a manorial hall to ask you into, but such as it is you're welcome. Hold hard, here."

The old man stopped before a private door in a small street of very small shops running between Leicester Square and the Haymarket, took out a key, and stood back for his companion to pass before him into a dark and

narrow passage. When the door was closed behind him, Mr. Byrne struck a light, and commenced making his way up the narrow staircase. Joyce followed him flight after flight, and past landing after landing, until at length the top story was reached. Then Mr. Byrne took out another key, and, unlocking the door immediately in front of him, entered the room and bade his companion follow him.

Walter Joyce found himself in a long low room, with a truckle bed in one corner, bookshelves ranged round three sides, and in the middle, over which the curtains were now drawn, a large square table, with an array of knives and scissors upon it, a heap of wool in one corner, and an open case of needles of various kinds, polished bright and shining. On one end of the mantelpiece stood a glass case containing a short-horned white owl, stuffed, and looking wonderfully sagacious; on the other a cock, with full crop and beady eye, and open bill, with one leg advanced, full of self-sufficiency and conceit. Over the mantlepiece, in a long low case, was an admirably carried out bit of Byrne's art, representing the death-struggles of a heron struck by a hawk. Both birds were stuffed, of course, but the characteristics of each had been excellently preserved; the delicate heron lay completely at the mercy of his active little antagonist, whose "pounce" had evidently just been made, and who with beak and talons was settling his prey.

While Joyce was looking round at these things, the old man had lit a lamp suspended from the ceiling, and another standing on the square work-table; had opened a cupboard, and from it had produced a black bottle, two tumblers, and a decanter of water; had filled and lit a mighty pipe, and had motioned his companion to make free with the liquor and with the contents of an ancient-looking tobacco-jar, which he pushed towards him.

"Smoke, man!" said he, puffing out a thin line of vapour through his almost closed lips, and fanning it away lazily with his hand—"smoke!—that's one thing they can't keep *from us, though* they'd like. My lord should puff

at his havannah while the commonalty, the plebs, the *profanum vulgus*, who are hated and driven away, should "exhale mundungus, ill-perfuming weed!" Thank God we've altered all that since poor John Philips's day; he'd get better change for his Splendid Shilling now than ever he did in his time, eh? Talking Greek to you, am I? or worse than Greek, for that you'd understand, I dare say, and you'll never understand my old mutterings and quotations. You can read Greek?"

"Yes," Joyce said; "I am reckoned a tolerable Grecian."

"Indeed!" said the old man, with a grin; "ah! no doubt you were an honour to your college."

"Unfortunately," said Walter, "I have never been to college."

"Then your state is the more gracious! By George! I thought I'd picked up with a sucking don, all trencher-cap, and second aorist, and Conservative principles, Church and State, a big Bible with a sceptre stretched across it, and a fear of the 'swart mechanics' bloody thumbs' printed off on my lord's furniture, as provided by Messrs. Jackson and Graham! You don't follow me, young fellow? Like enough, like enough. I think myself I'm a little enigmatical when I get on my hobby, and it requires a good steady stare of honest wonderment, such as I see on your face now, to bring me up short. I'm brought up short now, and can attend to more sublunary matters, such as yours. Tell me about yourself."

"What shall I tell you?" asked Joyce. "I can tell nothing beyond what you already know, or can guess. I'm without friends, without work; I've lost hope——"

"No, no, my boy! not lost, only mislaid it. We never lose hope so long as we're good for anything! Sometimes, when I've been most depressed and down, about the only thing in life that has any interest for me now—and you've no idea what that is, have you, Joyce, eh?"

"No, indeed; unless, perhaps, your children!"

"Children! Thank God, I never had a wife or a

child to give me a care. No; the People's cause, my boy, the People's cause! That's what I live for, and sometimes, as I've been saying, I've been downhearted about that. I've seen the blood beating us down on the one side, and the money beating us down on the other, and I've thought that it was useless kicking against the pricks, and that we had better cave in and give up!"

"But you say you never lost hope?"

"Never, entirely. When I've been at my lowest ebb, when I've come home here with the blood in my veins tingling from aristocratic insult, and with worse than that, contempt for my own fellow working-men surging up in my heart, I've looked up at that case there over the mantelshelf, and my pluck's revived. That's a fine bit of work, that is, done by an old pupil of mine, who worked his soul out in the People's cause in '48, and died in a deep decline soon after. But what a fancy the lad had! Look at that heron! Is not it for all the world like one of your long, limp, yaw-yaw, nothing-knowing, nothing-doing young swells? Don't you read 'used-up' in his delicate plumage, drooping wings, lack-lustre eye? And remark how the jolly little hawk has got him! No breed about him; keen of sight, swift of wing, active with beak and talon—that's all he can boast of; but he's got the swell in his grip, mind you! And he's only a prototype of what's to come!"

The old man rose as he spoke, and taking the lamp from the table, raised it towards the glass case. As he set it down again he looked earnestly at Joyce, and said—

"You think I'm off my head, perhaps—and I'm not sure that I'm not when I get upon this topic—and you're thinking that at the first convenient opportunity you'll slip away, with a 'Thank ye!' and leave the old lunatic to his democratic ravings? But, like many other lunatics, I'm only mad on one subject, and when that isn't mentioned I can converse tolerably rationally, can perhaps even be of some use in advising one friendless and destitute. And you, you say, are both."

"I am, indeed; but I scarcely think you can help me, Mr. Byrne, though I don't for an instant doubt your friendship or your wish to be of service. But it happens that the only people from whom I can hope to get anything in the way of employment, employment that brings money, belong to that class against which you have such violent antipathies, the—the 'swells,' as you call them."

"My dear young fellow, you mistake me. If you do as I should like you, as an honest Englishman with a freeman's birthright, to do; if you do as I myself—old Jack Byrne, one of the prisoners of '48; 'Bitter Byrne,' as they call me at the club—if you do as I do, you'll hate the swells with all your heart, but you'll use 'em. When I was a young man, young and foolish, blind and headstrong, as all young men are, I wouldn't take off my cap to a swell, wouldn't take a swell's orders, wouldn't touch a swell's money! Lord bless you, I saw the folly of that years ago! I should have been starved long since if I hadn't. My business is bird-stuffing, as you may have heard or guessed; and where should I have been if I'd had to live upon all the orders for bird-stuffing I got from the labouring classes? They can't stuff themselves enough, let alone their birds! The swells want owls, and hawks, and pheasants, and what not, stuffed with outspread wings for firescreens, but the poor people want the fire itself, and want it so badly that they never holloa for screens, and wouldn't use 'em if they had 'em. No, no; hate the swells, my boy, but use 'em. What have you been?"

"An usher in a school."

"Of course! I guessed it would be some of those delightful occupations for which the supply is unlimited and the demand nothing, but I scarcely thought it could be so bad as that! Usher in a school! hewer in a coal-pit, stone-breaker on a country road, horse in a mill, anything better than that!"

"What could I do?"

"What could you do? Sell your books, pawn your

watch, take a steerage passage and go out to Australia. Black boots, tend sheep, be cad to an omnibus, or shop-walker to a store out there; every one of 'em better than dragging on in the conventional torture of this played-out staggering old country! That's gassy a little, you'll think, and so it is; but I mean better than that. I've long-standing and intimate connections with the Zoological Acclimatisation Society in Melbourne, and if you can pay your passage out, I'll guarantee that, in the introductions I give you, they'll find you something to do. If you *can't* find the money for your passage out, perhaps it can be found for you!"

Not since James Ashurst's death, not for some weeks before that event, indeed, when the stricken man had taken leave of his old pupil and friend, had Walter Joyce heard the words of friendship and kindness from any man. Perhaps, a little unmanned by the disappointment and humiliation he had undergone since his arrival in London, he was a little unmanned at this speech from his newly found friend; at all events, the tears stood in his eyes, and his voice was husky as he replied—

"I ought to be very much obliged to you, and indeed, indeed I am; but I fear you'll think me an ungrateful cub when I tell you that I can't possibly go away from England. Possibly is a strong word, but I mean, that I can't think of it until I've exhausted every means, every chance of obtaining the barest livelihood here!"

The old man eyed him from under his bent brows earnestly for a moment, and then said abruptly, "Ties, eh? father?"

"No!" said Joyce, with a half blush—very young, you see, and country bred—"as both my mother and father are dead, but—but there is——"

"Oh, Lord!" grunted Mr. Byrne, "of course there is; there always is in such cases! Blind old bat I was not to see it at first! Ah, she was left lamenting, and all the rest of it; quite knocks the Australian idea on the head? Now let me think what can be done for you here! There's

Buncombe and Co., the publishers, want a smart young man, smart and cheap they said in their letter, to contribute to their new Encyclopædia, the Naturalist. That'll be one job for you, though it won't be much."

"But, Mr. Byrne," said Joyce, "I have no knowledge, or very little, of natural history. Certainly not enough to——"

"Not too much to prevent your being too proud to take a hint or two from Goldsmith's *Animated Nature*, my boy, as he took several from those who preceded him. That, and a German book or two you'll find on the shelves—you understand German? that's right—will help you to all the knowledge Buncombe will require of you, or all they ought to expect, for the matter of that, at ten-and-six the column. You can come here of a morning—you won't interfere with me—and grind away until dark, when we'll have a walk and a talk; you shall tell me all about yourself, and we'll see what more can be done, and then we'll have some food at Bliffkins's and learn all that's going on!"

"I don't know how to thank you," commenced Joyce.

"Then don't attempt to learn!" said the old man. "Does it suit you, as a beginning only, mind! do you agree to try it—we shall do better things yet, I hope; but will you try it?"

"I will indeed! If you only knew——"

"I do: good night! I got up at daybreak, and ought to have been in bed long since. Good night!"

Not since he had been in London, had Walter Joyce been so light of heart as when he closed Mr. Byrne's door behind him. Something to do at last! He felt inclined to cry out for joy; he longed for some one to whom he could impart his good fortune.

His good fortune! As he sat upon his wretched bed in his tiny lodging, luxurious words rang in his ears. "And the chance of achieving fame and fortune, keep that in the foreground!" Fame and fortune! And he had been overjoyed because he had obtained a chance of earning a few shillings as a bookseller's hack, a chance for which he

was indebted to a handicraftsman. But a poor first step towards fame and fortune, Marian would think! He understood how utter had been her inexperience and his own; he had learned the wide distance between the fulfilment of such hopes as theirs, and the best of the bare possibilities which the future held for them, and the pain which this knowledge brought him, more for the sake of his own share in it, was doubly keen for hers. It was very hard for Walter Joyce to have to suffer the terrible disappointment and disenchantment of experience; but it was far harder for him to have to cause her to share them. Marian would indeed think it a "poor first step." He little knew how much more decisive a one she was about to take herself.

CHAPTER VIII.

FLITTING.

MARIAN ASHURST dearly loved her home. To her concentrative and self-contained nature local associations were peculiarly precious; the place in which she had lived the life so essentially her own was very dear. The shabby old house, though she perfectly understood its shabbiness, and would have prized the power of renovating and adorning it as thoroughly as any *petite maîtresse* would have prized the power of adorning her *bijou* residence with all the prettiness of modern upholstery, was a shrine in her eyes. Base and unbeautiful, but sacred, the place in which her father had dutifully and patiently passed his laborious life—had it not been wasted? the proud discontented spirit asked itself many a time, but found no voice to answer "no."

She had often pictured to her fancy what the house might have been made, if there had but been money to make it anything with, money to do anything with; it

only they had not always been so helpless, so burdened with the especially painful load of genteel poverty. She had exercised her womanly ingenuity, put forth her womanly tastes, so far as she could, and the house was better than might have been expected under all the circumstances; but ingenuity and taste, which double the effect of money when united to that useful agency, are not of much avail without it, and will not supply curtains and carpet, paint, varnishing, and general upholstery. There was not a superfluous ornament, and there were many in the drawing-rooms at Woolgreaves very offensive to her instinctively correct taste,—whose price would not have materially altered the aspect of Marian Ashurst's home, as she had recognised with much secret bitterness of spirit, on her first visit to the Creswells. She would have made the old house pretty and pleasant, if she could, especially while he lived, to whom its prettiness and pleasantness might have brought refreshment of spirit, and a little cheerfulness in the surroundings of his toilsome life; but she loved it, notwithstanding its dulness and its frigid shabbiness, and the prospect of being obliged to leave it gave her exquisite pain. Marian was surprised when she discovered that her feelings on this point were keener than those of her mother. She had anticipated, with shrinking and reluctance of whose intensity she felt ashamed, the difficulty she should experience when that last worst necessity must arise, when her mother must leave the home of so many years, and the scene of her tranquil happiness. Mrs. Ashurst had been a very happy woman, notwithstanding her delicate health, and the difficulties it had brought upon the little household. In the first place, she was naturally of a placid temperament. In the second, her husband told her as little as possible of the constantly pressing, hopelessly inextricable trouble of his life. And lastly, Mrs. Ashurst's inexperience prevented her realising danger in the future from any source except that one whence it had actually come, fallen in its fullest, fatalmost might—the sickness and death of her husband.

When that tremendous blow fell upon her, it stunned the widow. She could not grieve, she could not care about anything else. She was not a woman of an imaginative turn of mind; feeling had always been powerful and deep in her; but fancy had ever been active, so that when the one awful and overwhelming fact existed, it was quite enough for her, it swamped everything else, it needed not to bring up any reinforcements to her discomfiture. She was ready to go anywhere with Marian, to do anything which Marian advised or directed. The old house was to be left, a new home was to be sought for. A stranger was coming to be the master where her husband's firm but gentle rule had made itself loved, respected, and obeyed for so long; a stranger was to sit in her husband's seat, and move about the house where his step and his voice were heard no more, listened for no longer, not even now, in the first confused moments of waking after the blessed oblivion of sleep.

And in that awful fact all was included. Poor Mrs. Ashurst cared little for the linen and the china now. Whether they should be packed up and removed to the humble lodgings which were to be the next home of herself and her daughter, or whether Mr. Ashurst's successor should be asked to take them at a valuation, were points which she left to Marian's decision. She had not any interest in anything of the kind now. It was time that Marian's mind should be made up on these and other matters; and the girl, notwithstanding her premature gravity and her habit of decision, found her task difficult in fact and sentiment. Her mother was painfully quiescent, hopelessly resigned. In every word and look she expressed plainly that life had come to a standstill for her, that she could no longer feel any interest or take any active part in its conduct; and thus she depressed Marian very much, who had her own sense of impending disappointment and imperative effort, in addition to their common sorrow, to struggle against.

Mrs. Ashurst and her daughter had seen a good deal of

the family at Woolgreaves since the day on which Marian's cherished belief in the value and delight of wealth had been strengthened by that visit to the splendid dwelling of her father's old friend. The young ladies had quite "taken to" Mrs. Ashurst, and Mrs. Ashurst had almost "taken to" them. They came into Helmingham frequently, and never without bringing welcome contributions from the large and lavishly kept gardens at Woolgreaves. They tried, in many girlish and unskilful ways, to be intimate with Marian; but they felt they did not succeed, and only their perception of their uncle's wishes prevented their giving up the effort. Marian was very civil, very much obliged for their kindness and attention; but uncordial, "un-getatable," Maude Creswell aptly described it.

The condition of Mr. Ashurst's affairs had not proved to be quite so deplorable as had been supposed. There was a small insurance on his life; there were a few trifling sums due to him, which the debtors made haste to pay, owing, indeed, to the immediate application made to them by Mr. Creswell, who interfered as actively as unostentatiously on behalf of the bereaved woman; altogether a little sum remained, which would keep them above want, or the almost equally painful effort of immediate exertion to earn their own living, *with management*. Yes, that was the qualification which Marian understood thoroughly, understood to mean daily and hourly self-denial, watchfulness, and calculation, and more and worse than that—the termination on her part of the hope of preventing her mother's missing the material comforts which had been procured and preserved for her by a struggle whose weariness she had never been permitted to comprehend.

The old house had been shabby and poor, but it had been comfortable. It had given them space and cleanliness, and there was no vulgarity in its meagreness. But the only order of lodgings to which her mother and she could venture to aspire was that which invariably combines the absence of space and of cleanliness with the presence of tawdriness and discomfort. And this must

last until Walter should be able to rescue them from it. She could not suffice to that rescue herself, but he would. He must succeed! Had he not every quality, every facility, and the strongest of motives? She felt this—that, in her case, the strongest motive would have been the desire for success, *per se;* but in his the strongest was his love of her. She recognised this, she knew this, she admired it in an odd abstract kind of way; when her heart was sufficiently disengaged from pressing care to find a moment for any kind of joy, she rejoiced in it; but she knew she could not imitate it—that was not in her. She had not much experience of herself yet, and the process of self-analysis was not habitual to her; but she felt instinctively that the more selfish instincts of love were hers, its noble influences, its profounder motives her lover's.

It was, then, to him she had to look, in him she had to trust, for the rescue that was to come in time. In how much time? in how little? Ah, there was the ever-present, ever-pressing question, and Marian brought to its perpetual repetition all the importance, all the unreasonable measurement of time, all the ignorance of its exceeding brevity and insignificance inseparable from her youth.

She had nearly completed the preparations for departure from the old home; the few possessions left her and her mother were ready for removal; a lodging in the village had been engaged, and the last few days were dragging themselves heavily over the heads of Mrs. Ashurst and Marian, when Mr. Creswell, having returned to Woolgreaves after a short absence, came to see them.

Mrs. Ashurst was walking in the neglected garden, and had reached the far end of the little extent when Mr. Creswell arrived at the open door of the house. A woman-servant, stolid and sturdy, was passing through the red-tiled square hall.

"Is Mrs. Ashurst in?" asked the visitor. "Mrs. Ashurst is in the garden, I see—don't disturb her."

Marian, who had heard the voice, answered Mr. Creswell's question by appearing on the threshold of the room which had been her father's study, and which, since his death, her mother and she had made their sitting-room. She looked weary; the too bright colour which fatigue brings to some faces was on hers, and her eyelids were red and heavy; her black dress, which had the limp, ungraceful, lustreless look of mourning attire too long unrenewed, hung on her fine upright figure after a fashion which told how little the girl cared how she looked; and the hand she first held out to Mr. Creswell, and then drew back with a faint smile, was covered with dust.

"I can't shake hands," she said; "I have been tying up the last bundles of books and papers, and my hands are disgraceful. Come in here, Mr. Creswell; I believe there is *one* unoccupied chair."

He followed her into the study, and took the seat she pointed out, while she placed herself on a pile of folios which lay on the floor in front of the low wide window. Marian laid her arm upon the window-sill, and leaned her head back against one of the scanty frayed curtains. Her eyes closed for a moment, and a slight shudder passed over her.

"You are very tired, Miss Ashurst, quite worn out," said Mr. Creswell; "you have been doing too much—packing all those books, I suppose."

"Yes," said Marian, "I looked to that myself, and, indeed, there was nobody else to do it. But it is tiring work, and dirty,"—she struck her hands together, and shook her dress, so that a shower of dust fell from it—"and sad work besides. You know, Mr. Creswell"—here her face softened suddenly, and her voice fell—"how much my father loved his books. It is not easy to say good-bye to them; it is like a faint echo, strong enough to pain one, though, of the good-bye to himself."

"But why are you obliged to say good-bye to them?" asked Mr. Creswell, with genuine anxiety and compassion.

"What could we do with them?" said Marian;

"there's no place to keep them. We must have taken another room specially for them if we took them to our lodgings, and there is no one to buy them here, so we are going to send them to London to be sold. I suppose they will bring a very small sum, indeed—nothing, perhaps, when the expenses are paid. But it is our only means of disposing of them; so I have been dusting and sorting and arranging them all day, and I am tired and dusty and sick—sick at heart."

Marian leaned her head on the arm which lay on the window-sill, and looked very forlorn. She also looked very pretty, and Mr. Creswell thought so. This softened mood, so unusual to her, became her, and the little touch of confidence in her manner, equally unusual, flattered him. He felt an odd sort of difficulty in speaking to her—to this young girl, his old friend's orphan child, one to whom he intended so kindly, towards whom his position was so entirely one of patronage, not in any offensive sense, of course, but still of patronage.

"I—I never thought of this," he said hesitatingly; "I ought to have remembered it, of course; no doubt the books must be a difficulty to you—a difficulty to keep and a harder one to part with. But bless me, my dear Miss Ashurst, you say there is no one here to buy them—you did not remember me? Why did you not remember me? Of course I will buy them. I shall be only too delighted to buy them, to have the books my good friend loved so much—of course I shall."

"I had seen your library at Woolgreaves," said Marian, replying to Mr. Creswell's first impetuous question, "and I could not suppose you wanted more books, or such shabby ones as these."

"You judge of books like a lady, then, though you were your father's companion as well as his pet," said Mr. Creswell, smiling. "Those shabby books are, many of them, much more valuable than my well-dressed shelf-fillers. And even if they were not, I should prize them for the same reason that you do, and almost as much—yes,

Miss Ashurst, almost as much. Men are awkward about saying such things, but I may tell his daughter that but for James Ashurst I never should have known the value of books—in other than a commercial sense, I mean."

"I don't know what they are worth," said Marian, "but if you will find out, and buy them, my mother and I will be very thankful. I know it will be a great relief to her to think of them at Woolgreaves, and all together. She has fretted more about my father's books being dispersed, and going into the hands of strangers, than about any other secondary cause of sorrow. The other things she takes quietly enough."

The widow could be seen from the window by them both as she pursued her monotonous walk in the garden, with her head bowed down and her figure so expressive of feebleness.

"Does she?" said Mr. Creswell. "I am very glad to hear that. Then"—and here Mr. Creswell gave a little sigh of relief—"we will look upon the matter of the books as arranged, and to-morrow I will send for them. Give yourself no further trouble about them. Fletcher shall settle it all."

"You will have them valued?" Marian asked with business-like seriousness.

"Certainly," returned Mr. Creswell. "And now tell me what your plans are, and where these lodgings are to which you alluded just now. Maude and Gertrude have not seen you, they tell me, since you took them?"

"No," said Marian, without the least tone of regret in her voice; "we have not met since your visit to Manchester. Miss Creswell's cold has kept her at home, and I have been much too busy to get so far as Woolgreaves."

"Your mother has seen my nieces?"

"Yes; Miss Gertrude Creswell called, and took her for a drive, and she remained to lunch at Woolgreaves. But that was one day when I was lodging-hunting—nothing had then been settled."

"The girls are very fond of Mrs. Ashurst."

"They are very kind," said Marian absently. The Misses Creswell were absolutely uninteresting to her, and as yet Marian Ashurst had never pretended to entertain a feeling she did not experience. The threshold of that particular school of life in which the art of feigning is learned lay very near her feet now, but they had not yet crossed it.

Marian and Mr. Creswell remained a long time together before Mrs. Ashurst came in. The girl spoke to the old gentleman with more freedom and with more feeling than on any previous occasion of their meeting; and Mr. Creswell began to think how interesting she was, in comparison with Maude and Gertrude, for instance; how much sense she had, how little frivolity. How very good-looking she was also; he had no idea she ever would have been so handsome—yes, positively handsome—he used the word in his thoughts—she certainly had not possessed anything like it when he had seen her formerly —a dark, prim, old-fashioned kind of girl, going about her father's study with an air of quiet appreciative sharpness and shrewdness which he did not altogether like. But she really had become quite handsome then, in her poor dress, with her grieved, tired face, her hair carelessly pushed off it any way, and her hands rough and soiled; she had made him recognise and feel that she had the gift of beauty also.

Mr. Creswell thought about this when he had taken leave of Mrs. Ashurst and Marian, having secured their promise to come to Woolgreaves on the day but one after, when he hoped Marian would assist him in assigning places to the books, which she felt almost reconciled to part with under these new conditions. He thought about them a good deal, and tried to make out, among the dregs of his memory, who it was who had said within his hearing, when Marian was a child, "Yes, she's a smart little girl, sure enough, and a dead hand at a bargain."

Marian Ashurst thought about Mr. Creswell after he

left her and her mother. Mrs. Ashurst was very much relieved and gratified by his kindness about the books, as was Marian also. But the mother and daughter regarded the incident from different points of view. Mrs. Ashurst dwelt on the kindness of heart which dictated the purchase of the dead friend's books as at once a tribute to the old friendship and a true and delicate kindness to the survivors. Marian saw all that, but she dwelt rather on the felicitous condition which rendered it easy to indulge such impulses. Here was another instance, and in her favour, of the value of money.

"It has made more than one difference to me," she thought that night, when she was alone, and looked round the dismantled study; "it has made me like old Mr. Creswell, and hitherto I have only envied him."

"Do be persuaded, dear Mrs. Ashurst," said Maude Creswell, in a tone of sincere and earnest entreaty. She had made her appearance at the widow's house early on the day which succeeded her uncle's visit, and had presented, in her own and in her sister's name, as well as in that of Mr. Creswell, a petition, which she was now backing up with much energy. "Do come and stay with us. We are not going to have any company; there shall be nothing that you can possibly dislike. And Gerty and I will not tease you or Miss Ashurst; and you shall not be worried by Tom or anything. *Do* come, dear, dear Mrs. Ashurst; never mind the nasty lodgings; they can go on getting properly aired, and cleaned, and so on, until you are tired of Woolgreaves, and then you can go to them at any time. But not from your own house, where you have been so long, into that little place, in a street, too. Say you will come, now do."

Mrs. Ashurst was surprised and pleased. She recognised the girl's frank affection for her; she knew the generous kindness of heart which made her so eager to do her uncle's bidding, and secure to those desolate women a long visit to the splendid home he had given his nieces.

Nothing but a base mean order of pride could have revolted against the offer so made and so pressed. Mrs. Ashurst yielded, and Maude Creswell returned to her uncle in high delight to announce that she had been successful in the object of her embassy.

"How delightful it will be to have the dear old lady here, Gerty!" said Maude to her sister. "The more I see of her the better I like her; and I mean to be so kind and attentive to her. I think Miss Ashurst is too grave, and she always seems so busy and preoccupied: I don't think she can rouse her mother's spirits much."

"No, I think not," said Gertrude. "I like the old lady very much too; but I don't quite know about Miss Ashurst; I think the more I see of her, the less I seem to know her. You must not leave her altogether to me, Maude. I wonder why one feels so strange with her? Heigh-ho!" said the girl, with a comical look, and a shake of her pretty head, "I suppose it's because she's so superior."

On the following day, Mrs. Ashurst and Marian took leave of their old home, and were conveyed in one of Mr. Creswell's carriages to Woolgreaves.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TENTH EARL.

Hetherington House stands in Beaufort Square, forming one side of that confessedly aristocratic quarter. The house stands back in melancholy "grounds" of dirty gravel, brown turf, and smutted trees, while the dwarf wall which forms the side of the square, and is indeed a sufficiently huge brick screen, fences off the commonalty, and prevents them from ever catching so much as a glimpse of the paradise within, save when the great

gates are flung open for the entrance or exit of vehicles, or when the porter, so gorgeous and yet so simple, is sunning himself in the calm evening air at the small postern-door. The Countess of Hetherington likes this brick screen, and looks upon it as a necessary appanage of her rank. When visitors, having exhausted every topic of conversation possible to their great minds—a feat which is easily performed in the space of five minutes—and, beginning to fear the immediate advent of brain-softening if not of idiotcy, suddenly become possessed with a fresh idea after a lengthened contemplation of the wall in front of them, and with an air of desperation ask whether it does not make the house dull, Lady Hetherington says that, on the contrary, it is the only thing that renders the house habitable. She confesses that, during the time she is compelled to be in London, the sight of hack cabs, and policemen on their beat, and those kind of things, are not absolutely necessary to her existence, and as Sir Charles Dumfunk insists on her rooms facing the west, she is glad that the wall is there to act as a screen. Oh yes, she is perfectly aware that Lord Letterkenney had the screen of Purcell House pulled down and an open Italian façade erected in its place, the picture of which was in the illustrated papers; but as Lady Letterkenney until her marriage had lived in Ireland, and had probably never seen anything human except priests and pigs, the sight of civilised beings was doubtless an agreeable novelty to her. The same circumstances did not exist in her, Lady Hetherington's, case, and she decidedly liked the screen.

The Earl likes the screen also, but he never says anything about it, chiefly because no one ever asks his opinion on any subject. He likes it because it is his, the Earl of Hetherington's, and he likes looking at it as he likes looking at the coronet on his plate, on his carriage-panels, and his horses' harness, at his family history as set forth by Burke and Debrett, and at the marginal illustrations of his coat-of-arms as given in those charming volumes, at his genealogical tree—a mysterious work of art which hangs in

the library, looking something like an enlarged "sampler" worked by a school-girl, and from the contemplation of which he derives intense delight. It does not take a great deal to fill Lord Hetherington's soul with rapture. Down in Norfolk villages, in the neighbourhood of his ancestral home, and far away in scattered cottages on the side of green Welsh mountains, where the cross-tree rears its inopportune head in the midst of the lovely landscape, and where smoke and coal-dust permeate the soft delicious air, his lordship, as landlord and mine-holder, is spoken of with bated breath by tenants and workmen, and regarded as one of the hardest-headed, tightest-fisted men of business by stewards and agents. They do not see much, scarcely anything, of him, they say, and they don't need to, if he's to be judged by the letters he writes and the orders he sends. To screw up the rents and to lengthen the hours of labour was the purport of these letters, while their style was modelled on that used by the Saxon Franklin to his hog-hind, curt, overbearing, and offensive. Agents and stewards, recipients of these missives, say bitter words about Lord Hetherington in private, and tenants and workmen curse him secretly as they bow to his decree. To them he is a haughty, selfish, grinding aristocrat, without a thought for any one but himselfs; whereas in reality he is a chuckle-headed nobleman, with an inordinate idea of his position certainly, but kindly hearted, a slave to his wife, and with one great desire in life, a desire to distinguish himself somehow, no matter how.

He had tried politics. When a young man he had sat as Lord West for his county, and the first Conservative ministry which came into office after he had succeeded to his title, remembering the service which Lord West had done them in roaring, hooting, and yar-yaring in the House of Commons, repaid the obligation by appointing the newly fledged Earl of Hetherington to be the head of one of the inferior departments. Immensely delighted was his lordship at first; went down to the office daily, to the intense astonishment of the departmental private

secretary, whose official labours had hitherto been confined to writing about four letters a day, took upon himself to question some of the suggestions which were made for his approval, carped at the handwriting of the clerks, and for at least a week thought he had at length found his proper place in the world, and had made an impression. But it did not last. The permanent heads of the department soon found him out, scratched through the external cuticle of pride and pomposity, and discovered the true obstinate dullard underneath. And then they humoured him, and led him by the nose as they had led many a better man before him, and he subsided into a nonentity, and then his party went out of office, and when they came in again they declined to reappoint Lord Hetherington, though he clamoured ever so loudly.

Social science was the field in which his lordship next disported himself, and prolix, pragmatical, and eccentric as are its professors generally, he managed to excel them all. Lord Hetherington had his theories on the utilisation of sewage and the treatment of criminals, on strikes and trades unions—the first of which he thought should be suppressed by the military, the second put down by Act of Parliament—and on the proper position of women; on which subject he certainly spoke with more than his usual spirit and fluency. But he was a bore upon all; and at length the social-science audiences, so tolerant of boredom, felt that they could stand him no longer, and coughed him down gently but firmly when he attempted to address them. Lord Hetherington then gave up social science in disgust, and let his noble mind lie fallow for a few months, during which time he employed himself in cutting his noble fingers with a turning-lathe which he caused to be erected in his mansion, and which amused him very much: until it suddenly occurred to him that the art of bookbinding was one in which his taste and talent might find a vent. So the room in which the now deserted turning-lathe stood was soon littered with scraps of leather and floating fragments of gilt-leaf; and there his lordship

spent hours every day looking on at two men very hard at work in their shirt-sleeves, and occasionally handing them the tools they asked for: and thus he practised the art of book-binding. Every one said it was an odd thing for a man to take to, but every one knew that Lord Hetherington was an odd man; consequently no one was astonished, after the bound volumes had been duly exhibited to dining or calling friends, and had elicted the various outbursts of "Jove!" "Ah!" "Charming!" "Quite too nice!" and "Can't think how he does it, eh?" which politeness demanded—no one was astonished to hear that his lordship, panting for something fresh in which to distinguish himself, had found it in taxidermy, which was now absorbing all the energies of his noble mind. The receipt of a packet of humming-birds, presented by a poor relation in the navy, first turned Lord Hetherington's thoughts to this new pursuit; and he acted with such promptitude, that before the end of a week Mr. Byrne—small, shrunken, and high-shouldered—had taken the place at the bench erst occupied by the stalwart men in shirt-sleeves; but the smell of paste and gum had been supplanted by that of pungent chemicals, the floor was strewn with feathers and wool instead of leather and gilt-leaf, and his lordship, still looking on and handing tools to his companion, was stuffing birds very much in the same way as he had bound books.

It was a fine sight to see old Jack Byrne, "Bitter Byrne," the ultra-radical, the sourest-tongued orator of the Spartan Club, the ex-Chartist prisoner, waited on by gorgeous footmen in plush and silk stockings, fed on French dishes and dry sherry, and accepting it all as if he had been born to the situation.

"Why should I quarrel with my bread and butter, or what's a devilish deal better than bread and butter," he asked in the course of a long evening's ramble with Walter Joyce, "because it comes from a representative of the class I hate? I earn it, I work honestly and hard for my wage, and suppose I am to act up to the sham self-denial preached

in some of the prints which batten on the great cause without understanding or caring for it—suppose I were to refuse the meal which my lord's politeness sends me, as some of your self-styled Gracchi or Patriots would wish, how much further should we have developed the plans, or by what the more should we have dealt a blow at the institution we are labouring to destroy? Not one jot! My maxim, as I have told you before, is, use these people! Hate them if you will, despise them as you must, but use them!"

The old man's vehemence had a certain weight with Joyce, who, nevertheless, was not wholly convinced as to the propriety of his friend's position, and said, "You justify your conduct by Lord Hetherington's, then? You use each other?"

"Exactly! My Lord Hetherington in Parliament says, or would say if he were allowed the chance, but they know him too well for that, so he can only show by his votes and his proxies—proxies, by the Lord! isn't that a happy state of things when a minister can swamp any measure that he chooses by pulling from his pocket a few papers sent to him by a few brother peers, who care so little about the question in hand that they won't even leave their dinner-tables to come down and hear it discussed?—says that he loathes what he is pleased to call the lower classes, and considers them unworthy of being represented in the legislature. But then he wants to stuff birds, or rather to be known as a bird-stuffer of taste, and none of the House of Peers can help him there. So he makes inquiries, and is referred to me, and engages me, and we work together—neither abrogating our own sentiments. He uses my skill, I take his money, each has his *quid pro quo;* and if the time were ever to come,—as it may come, Walter, mark my words—as it *must* come, for everything is tending towards it,—when the battle of the poor against the rich, the bees against the drones, is fought in this country, fought out, I mean, practically and not theoretically, we shall each of us, my Lord Hetherington and I, be found on our re-

spective sides, without the slightest obligation from one to the other!"

Joyce had come to look forward to those evening walks with the old man as the pleasantest portion of the day. From nine till six he laboured conscientiously at the natural-history work which Mr. Byrne had procured for him, dull uninteresting work enough, but sufficiently fairly rewarded. Then he met his old friend at Bliffkins's, and after their frugal meal they set out for a long ramble through the streets. Byrne was full of information, which, in his worldly wise fashion, he imparted, tinged with social philosophy or dashed with an undercurrent of his own peculiar views. Of which an example. Walter Joyce had been standing for five minutes, silent, rapt in delight at his first view of the Parliament Houses as seen from Westminster Bridge. A bright moonlight night, soft, dreamy, even here, with a big yellow harvest moon coming up from the back, throwing the delicate tracery into splendid relief, and sending out the shadows thick and black; the old man looking on calmly, quietly chuckling at the irrepressible enthusiasm mantling over his young friend's cheeks and gleaming in his eyes.

"A fine place, lad?"

"Fine! splendid, superb!"

"Well, not to put *too* fine a point upon it, we'll say fine. Ah, they may blackguard Barry as much as they like—and when it comes to calling names and flinging mud in print, mind you, I don't know anybody to beat your architect or your architect's friend—but there's not another man among 'em could have done anything like that! That's a proper dignified house for the Parliament of the People to sit in—when it comes!"

"But it does sit there, doesn't it!"

"It? What? The Parliament of the People? No, sir; that sits, if you would believe certain organs of the press, up a court in Fleet Street, where it discusses the affairs of the nation over screws of shag tobacco and pots of fourpenny ale. What sits there before us is the Crœsus

Club, a select assemblage of between six and seven hundred members, who drop down here to levy taxes and job generally in the interval between dinner and bed."

"Are they—are they there now?" asked Joyce eagerly, peering with outstretched neck at the building before him.

"Now? No, of course not, man! They're away at their own devices, nine-tenths of them breaking the laws which they helped to make, and all enjoying themselves, and wondering what the devil people find to grumble at!"

"One of the governors of the old school, down, down at Helmingham"—a large knot swelled in Joyce's throat as he said the word, and nearly choked him; never before had he felt the place so far away or the days spent there so long removed from his then life—"was a member of Parliament, I think. Lord Beachcroft. Did you ever hear of him?"

The old man smiled sardonically.

"Hear of him, man? There's not one of them that has made his mark, or that is likely to make his mark in any way, that I don't know by sight, or that I haven't heard speak. I know Lord Beachcroft well enough; he's a philanthropist, wants camphorated chalk tooth-powder for the paupers, and horse-exercise for the convicts. Registered among the noodles, ranks A 1, weakly built, leaden-headed, and wants an experienced keeper!"

"That doctrine would have been taken as heresy at Helmingham! I know he came there once on our speech-day to deliver the prizes, and the boys all cheered him to the echo!"

"The boys! of course they did! The child is father to the man! I forgot, people don't read Wordsworth nowadays, but that's what he says, and he and Tennyson are the only poet-philosophers that have risen amongst us for many years; and boys shout, as men would, at the mere sight, at the mere taste of a lord! How they like to roll 'your lordship' round their mouths, and fear lest they should lose the slightest atom of its flavour! Not that the boys did wrong in cheering Lord Beachcroft! He's harm-

less enough, and well-meaning, I'm sure, and stands well up among the noodles. And it's better to stand anywhere amongst them than to be affiliated to the other party!"

"The other party? Who are they, Mr. Byrne?"

"The rogues, lad, the rogues! Rogues and noodles make up the blessed lot of senators sitting in your gim-crack palace, who vote away your birthright and mine, tax the sweat of millions, bow to Gold Stick and kiss Black Rod's coat-tails, send our fleets to defend Von Sourkraut's honour, or our soldiers to sicken of jungle fever in pursuit of the rebel Lollum Dha's adversaries! Parliament? Representatives of the people? Very much! My gallant friend, all pipeclay and padded breast, who won't hear of the army estimates being reduced; my learned friend, who brings all his forensic skill and all his power of tongue-fence, first learned in three-guinea briefs at the Old Bailey, and now educated up into such silvery eloquence, into play for the chance of a judgeship and a knighthood; the volatile Irish member, who subsides finally into the consulate of Zanzibar; the honourable member, who, having in his early youth swept out a shop at Loughboro', and arrived in London with eightpence, has accumulated millions, and is, of course, a strong Tory, with but two desires in life—to keep down 'the people,' and to obtain a card for his wife for the Premier's Saturday evenings—these are the representatives of the people for you! Rogues and noodles, noodles and rogues. Don't you like the picture?"

"I should hate it, if I believed in it, Mr. Byrne!" said Joyce, moving away, "but I don't! You won't think me rude or unkind, but—but I've been brought up in so widely different a faith. I've been taught to hold in such reverence all that I hear you deny, that——"

"Stick to it, lad! hold to it while you can!" said the old man kindly, laying his hand on his companion's arm. "My doctrines are strong meat for babes—too strong, I dare say—and you're but a toothless infant yet in these things, anyhow! So much the better for you. I recollect

a story of some man who said he was never happy or well after he was told he had a liver! Go on as long as you can in pleasant ignorance of the fact that you have a political liver. Some day it will become torpid and sluggish, and then—then come and talk to old Dr. Byrne. Till then, he won't attempt to alarm you, depend upon it!"

Not very long to be deferred was the day in which the political patient was to come to the political physician for advice and for treatment.

Beaufort Square looked hideously dull as Lord Hetherington drove through it on his way to his home from the railway station a few days after the conversation above recorded, and the clanging of his own great gates as they shut behind him echoed and re-echoed through the vast deserted space. The gorgeous porter and all the regiment of domestics were down at Westhope, the family place in Norfolk, so the carriage-gates were opened by a middle-aged female with her head tied up for toothache, and Mrs. Mason, the housekeeper, with a female retinue, was waiting to receive his lordship on the steps. Always affable to old servants of the family, whose age, long service, and comfortable comely appearance do him credit, as he thinks, Lord Hetherington exchanges a few gracious words with Mrs. Mason, desires that Mr. Byrne shall be shown in to him so soon as he arrives, and makes his way across the great hall to the library. The shutters of his room have been opened, but there has been no time given for further preparations, and the big writing-table, the globes, and the bookcases are all swathed in ghostly holland drapery. The bust of the ninth earl, Lord Hetherington's father, has slipped its head out of its covering, and looks astonished and as if it had been suddenly called up in its night-clothes. My lord looks dismayed, as well he may, at the dreary room, but finds no more cheerful outlook from the window into the little square garden, where a few melancholy leaves are rotting in the dirty corners into which they have drifted, and where Mrs. Mason's grandson, unconscious

of observation, is throwing stones at a cat. My lord rattles the loose silver in his trousers-pockets, and walks up to the fireplace and inspects his tongue in the looking-glass, whistles thoughtfully, sighs heavily, and is beginning to think he shall go mad, when Mrs. Mason opens the door and announces "Mr. Byrne."

"How do, Byrne?" says his lordship, much relieved. "Glad to see you—come up on purpose—want your help!"

Mr. Byrne returns his lordship's salutations, and quietly asks in what way he can be of use. His lordship is rather taken aback at being so suddenly brought to book, but says with some hesitation—

"Well, not exactly in your own way, Byrne; I don't think I shall do any more what-d'ye-call-ums, birds, any more—for the present, I mean, for the present. Her ladyship thought those last screens so good that it would be useless to try to improve on them, and so she's given me —I mean I've got—another idea."

Mr. Byrne, with the faintest dawn of a cynical grin on his face, bows and waits.

"Fact is," pursues his lordship, "my place down at Westhope, full of most monstrously interesting records of our family from the time of—oh, the Crusaders and Guy Fawkes and the Pretender, and all that kind of thing; records, don't you know; old papers, and what they call documents, you know, and those kind of things. Well, I want to take all these things and make 'em into a sort of history of the family, you know, to write it and have it published, don't they call it? You know what I mean."

Mr. Byrne intimates that they do call it published, and that he apprehends his lordship's meaning completely.

"Well, then, Byrne," his lordship continues, "what I sent for you for is this. 'Tisn't in your line, I know, but I've found you clever, and all that kind of thing, and above your station. Oh, I mean it, I do indeed, and I want you to find me some person, respectable and educated and all that, who will just go through these papers, you know,

and select the right bits, you know, and write them down, you know, and, in point of fact, just do—you know what I mean."

Mr. Byrne, with a radiant look which his face but seldom wore, averred that he not merely understood what was meant, but that he could recommend the very man whom his lordship required: a young man of excellent address, good education, and great industry.

"And he'll understand——?" asked Lord Hethering-ton hesitatingly, and with a curious look at Mr. Byrne.

"Everything," replied the old man. "Your lordship's book will be the most successful thing you've done."

"Then bring him to the Clarendon at twelve the day after to-morrow. As he's to live in the house, and that kind of thing, her ladyship must see him before he's engaged."

"I suppose I may congratulate you, my boy," said Byrne to Joyce a day or two afterwards, as they walked away from the Clarendon Hotel after their interview, "though you don't look much pleased about it."

"I am an ungrateful brute," said Walter; "I ought to have thanked you the instant the door closed; for it is entirely owing to you and your kindness that I have obtained this splendid chance. But——"

"But what?" said the old man kindly.

"Did you notice that woman's reception of me, and the way she spoke?"

"That woman? Oh, my Lady! H'm—she's not too polite to those she considers her inferiors."

"Polite? To me it was imperious, insolent, degrading! But I can put up with it!" And he added softly to himself, "For Marian's sake!"

CHAPTER X.

AN INTERIOR.

MARIAN ASHURST had begun, soon after their parting, to feel that she had been somewhat too sanguine in her anticipations of the immediate success of Walter Joyce. Each little difficulty she had had to encounter in her own life until the old home was left behind had aided to depress her, to force her to understand that the battle of life was harder to fight than she had fancied it, and had brought to her mind a shapeless fear that she had mistaken, overvalued, the strength and efficacy of the weapons with which she must fight that battle. Walter's letters had not tended to lift her heart up from its depression. His nature was essentially candid; he had neither the skill nor the inclination to feign, and he had kept her exactly informed. On his return home after his interview with Lord and Lady Hetherington, Joyce found a letter awaiting him. It was from Marian, written to her lover from Mr. Creswell's house, and ran as follows:

"Woolgreaves, Wednesday.

"MY DEAREST WALTER,

"The project I told you of, in my last letter, has been carried out; mamma and I are settled for the present at Woolgreaves. How strange it seems! Everything has been done so suddenly when it came to the point, and Mr. Creswell and his nieces turned out so differently from what I expected. I did not look for their taking any notice of us, except in the commonplace way of people in their position to people in ours. I always had a notion that 'womankind' have but a small share in men's friendships. However, these people seem determined to make me out in the wrong, and though I do not give the young ladies credit for more than intelligent

docility, making them understand that their best policy is to carry out their uncle's kind intentions—that they have more to gain by obedience in this respect than to lose by anything likely to be alienated from them in our direction—I must acknowledge that their docility is intelligent. They made the invitation most graciously, urged it most heartily, and are carrying out all it implied fully. You will have been surprised at mamma's finding the idea of being in any one's house endurable, under the circumstances, but she really likes it. Maude and Gertrude Creswell, who are the very opposites of me in everything, belong to the 'sweet-girl' species, and mamma has found out that she likes sweet girls. Poor mamma, she never had the chance of making the discovery before! I do believe it never occurred to her that her own daughter was not a 'sweet girl,' until she made the conquest of the hearts of these specimens. The truth is, also, that mamma feels, she *must* feel, every one must feel the material comfort of living as we are living here, in comparison with the makeshift wretchedness of the lodging into which we shall have to go, when our visit here comes to a conclusion, and still more, as a *thoroughly known and felt* standard of comparison, with the intense and oppressive sadness, and the perpetual necessity for watchfulness in the least expense, which have characterised our dear old house since our sad loss. She is not herself aware of the good which it has done her to come here, she does not perceive the change it has wrought in her, and it is well she should not, for I really think the simple, devoted, grieving soul would be hurt and angry with herself at the idea that anything should make any difference to her, that she should be 'roused.' How truly my dear father understood, how highly he prized her exquisite sensitiveness of feeling; he was just the man to hold it infinitely above all the strong-mindedness in the world! I am stronger minded, happily—I wonder if you like to know that I am, or whether you, too, prefer the weaker, the more womanly type, as people say, forgetting that most of the endurance,

and a good deal of the work, in this world, is our 'womanly' inheritance, and that some of us, at least, do it with discredit. You don't want moralising, or philosophising, from me, though, dearest Walter, do you? You complain of my matter-of-fact letters as it is. I must not yield to my bad habit of talking to myself, rather than to you on paper.

"Well, then, we came to Woolgreaves, and found the heartiest of welcomes, and everything prepared for our comfort. As I don't think you know anything more of the place than could be learned from our summer-evening strolls about the grounds, when we always took such good care to keep well out of sight of the windows, I shall describe the house. You will like to know where and how I live, and to see in your fancy my surroundings. How glad I shall be when you, too, can send me a sketch of anything you can call 'home!' Of course, I don't mean that to apply to myself here; I never let any feeling of enjoyment really take possession of me because of its transitoriness; you know exactly in what sense I mean it, a certain feeling of comfort and quiet, of having to-morrow what you have had to-day, of seeing the same people and the same things around, which makes up the idea of home, though it must all vanish soon. I wonder if men get used to alterations in their modes of life so soon as women do? I fancy not. I know there is mamma, and I am sure a more easily pleased, less consciously selfish human being never existed (if her share in the comforts of home was disproportionate, it was my dear father's doing, not of her claiming), and yet she has been a week here, and all the luxury she lives in seems as natural to her, as indispensable as the easy-chair, the especially good tea, the daily glass of wine, the daintiest food which were allotted to her at home. I saw the girls exchange a look this morning when she said, 'I hope it won't rain, I shall miss my afternoon drive so much!' I wonder what the look meant? Perhaps it meant, 'Listen to that upstart! She never had a carriage of her own in her life, and because she has the use of ours

for a few days, she talks as if it were a necessary of life.' Perhaps—and I think they may be sufficiently genuinely sweet girls to make it possible—the look may have meant that they were glad to think they had it in their power to give her anything she enjoyed so much. I like it very much, too; there is more pleasure in driving about leisurely in a carriage which you have not to pay for than I imagined; but I should be sorry the girls knew I cared very much about it. I have not very much respect for their intellects, and silly heads are apt to take airs at the mere idea of being in a position to patronise. Decidedly the best room in the house is mamma's, and she likes it so much. I often see the thought in her face, 'If we could have given him all these comforts, we might have had him with us now.' And so we might, Walter, so we might. Just think of the great age some of the very rich and grand folks live to; I am sure I have seen it in the papers hundreds of times, seventy, eighty, ninety sometimes, just because they *are* rich; rank has nothing to do with it beyond implying wealth, and if my father had been even a moderately rich man, if he had been anything but a poor man, he would have been alive to-day. We must try to be rich, my dearest Walter, and if that is impossible (and I fear it, I fear it much since I have been here, and Mr. Creswell has told me a good deal about how he made his money, and from all he says it seems indispensable to have *some* to begin with, there is truth in the saying that *money makes money*)—if that is impossible, at least we must not think of marrying while we are poor. I don't think anything can compensate to one's self for being poor, and I am quite sure nothing can compensate for seeing any one whom one loves exposed to the privations and the humiliations of poverty. I have thought so much of this, dearest Walter, I have been so doubtful whether you think of it seriously enough. It seems absurd for a woman to say to a man that she ponders the exigencies of life more wisely, and sees its truths more fully than he does; but I sometimes think women do so, and in *our* case I think I

estimate the trial and the struggle there is before us more according to their real weight and severity than you do, Walter, for you think of me only, whereas I think of you more than of myself, and as *one* with myself. I have learned, since I came here, that to understand what poverty really means one must see the details of wealth. We have only a general idea of a fine house and grounds, a luxurious table and a lot of servants. The general idea seems very grand and attractive, but when one sees it all in working order, when one can find out the cost of each department, the price of every article, the scale on which it is all kept up, not for show, but *for every-day use*, then the real meaning of wealth, the awful difficulty of attaining it, realise themselves to one's mind. The Creswell girls know nothing about the mechanism of their splendid home, not much about even their personal expenses. 'Uncle gives us a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and tells us we may send him in any reasonable number of bills besides,' Maude told me. And it is quite true. They keep no accounts. I checked her maid's book for Gertrude, warning her not to let her servant see her ignorance, and she says she does not think she ever had some of the things put down. Just think of that! No dyeing old dresses black for mourning for them, and turning rusty crape! Not that that sort of thing signifies—the calculation is on too large a scale for such small items—they only illustrate the whole story of poverty. The housekeeper and I are quite friendly. She has a notion that ladies ought to understand economy, and she is very civil. She has explained everything to me, and I find the sums which pass through her hands alone would be a fortune to us. There are twenty servants in the house and stables, and their 'hall' is a sight! When I think of the shabby dining-room in which my dear father used to receive his friends—great people, too, sometimes, but not latterly—I do feel that human life is a very unfair thing.

"The great wide hall, floored with marble, and ornamented with pictures, and lamps on pedestals, and stags'-

heads, and all the things one sees in pictures of halls, is in the centre of the house, and has a dark carved-oak gallery all round it, on which numerous rooms open; but on the ground-floor there is a grand dining-room, and a smaller room where we breakfast, a billiard-room, a splendid library (all my father's books are in it now, and look nothing in the crowd), an ante-room where people wait who come on business to Mr. Creswell (all his business seems to consist in disposing surplus money to advantage), and at the back of all, opening on the most beautiful flower-garden you can conceive, an immense conservatory. This is a great pleasure to mamma; there are no painful associations with *such* flowers for her; my father never gave her such bouquets as Gertrude brings to the breakfast-table every morning and presents to her with a kiss, which her uncle seems to think particularly gracious and kind, for he always smiles at her.

"Indeed, he smiles a good deal at every one, for he is a very good-natured, amiable, and kindly man, and seems to think little of his wealth. I am sure he is dreadfully imposed upon—indeed, I have found out many instances of it. How happy he could make *us* if he would! I dare say he would not miss the money which would make us comfortable. But I must not think of such a thing. No one could afford to give so much as it would be *wise* to marry on, and we never should be happy if we were not wise. I don't think Mr. Creswell has a trouble in the world, except his son Tom, and I am not sure that he is a trouble to him—for he doesn't talk much about himself—but I am quite sure he ought to be. The boy is as graceless, selfish, heartless a cub, I think, as ever lived. I remember your thinking him very troublesome and disobedient in school, and he certainly is not better at home, where he has many opportunities of gratifying his evil propensities not afforded him by school. He is very much afraid of me, short a time as I have been here, that is quite evident; and I am inclined to think one reason why Mr. Creswell likes my being here so much is the influence

I exercise over Tom. Very likely he does not acknowledge that to himself as a reason, perhaps he does not even know it; but I can discern it, and also that it is a great relief to the girls. They are very kind to Tom, who worries their lives out, I am sure, when they are alone; but 'schoolmaster's daughter' was always an awful personage in the old days, and makes herself *felt* now very satisfactorily, though silently. I fancy Tom will turn out to be the crook in his father's lot when he grows up. He is an unmannerly, common creature, not to be civilised by all the comfort and luxury of home, or softened by all the gentleness and indulgence of his father. He is doing nothing just now; he did not choose to remain with papa's successor, and is running wild until he can be placed with a private tutor—some clergyman who takes only two or three pupils. Meantime, the coachman and the groom are his favourite associates, and the stable his resort of predilection.

"Do you remember the beech-copse just beyond Hillside Road? The windows of my room look out in that direction, far away, beyond the Woolgreaves grounds; I can see the tops of the trees, and the winding road beyond them. I go up to my room every evening, to see the sun set behind the hill there, and to think of the many times we walked there and talked of what was to be. Will it ever be, Walter? Were we not foolish boy and girl—foolish paupers? Ay, the word, hard, ugly, but *true*. When I look round this room I feel it, oh, so true! Mamma and I have a pretty sitting-room, and a bedroom each on opposite sides of it. Such rooms! the very simplicity and exquisite freshness of their furniture and appointments are more significant of wealth, of the ease of household arrangement, and the perfection of household service, than any amount of rich upholstery. And then the drawing-rooms, and the girls' rooms, and the music-room, and the endless spare rooms—which, by-the-by, are rarely occupied; for so rich a man, and one with such a house, Mr. Creswell seems to me to have singularly little society.

No one but the clergyman and his wife has been since we came. I thought it might be out of delicate consideration for us that Mr. Creswell might have signified a wish for especial privacy, but I find that is not the case. He said to me to-day that he feared we found Woolgreaves dull. I do not. I have too much to think of to be affected by anything of that kind; and as my thoughts are rarely of a cheerful order, I should not ingratiate myself by social agreeability. Our life is quietly luxurious. I adhere to my old habits of early rising; but I am the only person in the house who enjoys the beauty of the gardens and grounds in the sweet morning. We breakfast at ten, and mamma and the girls go out into the lawn or into the garden, and they chat to her and amuse her until luncheon. I usually pass the morning in the library, reading and writing, or talking with Mr. Creswell. It is very amusing and interesting to me to hear all about his career, how he made so much money, and how he administers it. I begin to understand it very well now. I don't think I should make a bad woman of business by any means, and I am sure everything of the kind would have a great interest for me, even apart from my desire for money, and my conviction that neither happiness nor repose is to be had in this world without it. The old gentleman seems surprised to find me interested and intelligent about what he calls such dry detail; but, just as books and pictures are interesting, though one may never hope to possess them, so money, though it does not belong to myself, and never can, interests me. Oh, my dearest Walter, if we had but a little, just a few hundreds of pounds, and Mr. Creswell could teach you how to employ it with advantage in some commercial undertaking! He began with little more than one thousand pounds, and now! But I might as well wish you had been born an archbishop. In the afternoon, there is our drive. What handsome houses we see, what fine places we pass by! How often I occupy myself with thinking what I should do if I only had them, and the money they represent! And how hard the

sight of them makes the past appear! How little, falling to *our* share, would make the future smiling and happy!

"The girls are not interesting companions to Mr. Creswell. He is fond of them, and very kind to them—in fact, lavishly generous—they never have an ungratified wish; but how can a man, whose whole life has been devoted to business, feel much companionship with young girls like them, who do not know what it means? Of course, they think and talk about their dead parents—at least, I suppose so—and their past lives, and neither subject has any charms for their uncle. They read—especially Maude—and, strange to say, they read solid books as well as novels; they excel in fancy-work, which I detest, probably because I can't do it, and could not afford to buy the materials if I understood the art; and they both play and sing. I have heard very little good music, and I am not a judge, except of what is pleasing to myself; but I think I am correct in rating Maude's musical abilities very highly. Her voice thrills me almost to pain, and to see my mother's quiet tears when Maude plays to her in the dim evening is to feel that the power of producing such salutary healing emotion is priceless indeed. What a pity it is I am not a good musician! Loving music as you love it, dearest Walter, it will be a privation to you—if ever that time we talked of comes, when we should have a decent home to share—that I shall not be able to make sweet music for you. They are not fond of me, but I did not think they would be, and I am not disappointed. I like them, but they are too young, too happy, and *too rich* for me not to envy them a little, and though love and jealousy may coexist, love and envy cannot.

"In all this long letter, my own Walter, I have said nothing of *you*. You understand why. I *dare* not. I dare not give utterance to the discouragement which your last vague letter caused me, lest such discouragement should infect you, and by lowering your spirits weaken your efforts. Under these circumstances, and until I hear

from you more decisively, I will say nothing, but strive and hope! On my side, there is little striving possible, and I dare not tell you how little hope.

"Your own

"MARIAN."

To the strong, loving, and loyal heart of Walter, a letter from Marian was a sacred treasure, a full, intense, solemn delight. She had thought the thoughts, written the words, touched the paper. When disappointment, distress, depression, and uncertainty accumulated upon him most ruthlessly, and bore him most heavily to the ground, he shook them from him at the bidding of a letter from her, and rose more than ever determined not to be beaten in the struggle which was to bring him such a reward. The calmness, the seeming coldness even of her letters did not annoy or disappoint him; theirs was the perfect love that did not need protestation—that was as well and as ill, as fully and as imperfectly, expressed by the simplest affirmation as by a score of endearing phrases. No letter of Marian's had ever failed to delight, to strengthen, to encourage Walter Joyce, until this one reached him.

He opened the envelope with an eager touch, his dark cheek flushed, and a tender smile shone in his eyes; he murmured a word of love as the closely written sheets met his impatient gaze.

"A long letter to-day, Marian, my darling. Did you guess how sadly I wanted it?"

But as Walter read the letter his countenance changed. He turned back, and read some portions twice over, then went on, and when he concluded it began again. But not with the iteration of a lover refreshing his first feeling of delight, seeking pet passages to dwell on afresh. There was no such pleasurable impulse in the moody re-reading of his letter. Walter frowned more than once while he read it, and struck the hand in which he held it monotonously against his knee when he had acquired the full unmistakable meaning of it.

His face had been sad and anxious when the letter reached him—he had reason for sadness and anxiety—but when he had read it for the last time, and thrust it into his breast-pocket, his face was more than sad and anxious —it was haggard, gloomy, and angry.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LOUT.

Mr. Creswell's only son, who was named after Mr. Creswell's only brother, by no means resembled his prototype either in appearance, manners, or disposition. For whereas Tom Creswell the elder had been a long, lean, washed-out-looking person, with long, wiry black hair, sallow complexion, hollow cheeks, and a faint dawn of a moustache (in his youth he had turned down his collars and modelled himself generally on Lord Byron, and throughout his life he was declared by his wife to be most aristocratic and romantic-looking), Tom Creswell the younger had a small, round, bullet head, with closely cropped sandy hair, eyes deeply sunken and but little visible, snub nose, wide mouth, and dimpled chin. Tom Creswell the elder rose at noon, and lay upon the sofa all day, composing verses, reading novels, or playing the flute. Tom Creswell the younger was up at five every morning, round through the stables, saw the horses properly fed, peered into every corn-bin ("Darng, now whey do thot? Darnged if un doesn't count carn-grains, I think," was the groom's muttered exclamation on this proceeding), ran his hand over the animals, and declared that they "didn't carry as much flesh as they might," with a look at the helpers which obviously meant that they starved the cattle and sold the oats. Then Tom the younger would go to the garden, where his greatest delight lay in counting the

peaches and nectarines, and plums and apricots, nestling coyly against the old red south wall, in taking stock of the cucumbers and melons under their frames, and in ticking off the number of the bunches of grapes slowly ripening in the sickly heat of the vinery, while the Scotch head-gardener, a man whose natural hot-headedness was barely kept within bounds by the strictness of his religious opinions, would stand by looking on, outwardly placid, but inwardly burning to deliver himself of his sentiments in the Gaelic language. Tom Creswell the elder was always languid and ailing; as a boy he had worn a comforter, and a hare-skin on his chest, had taken cough-lozenges and jujubes, had been laughed at and called "Molly" and "Miss" by his schoolfellows, and had sighed and simpered away his existence. Tom Creswell the younger was strong as a Shetland pony, and hard as a tennis-ball, full of exuberant vitality which, not finding sufficient vent in ordinary schoolboy fun, in cricket, or hockey, or football, let itself off in cruelty, in teasing and stoning animals, in bullying smaller boys. Tom Creswell the elder was weak, selfish, idle, and conceited, but—you could not help allowing it—he was a gentleman. Tom Creswell the younger—you could not possibly deny it—was a blatant cad.

Not the least doubt of it. Everybody knew it, and most people owned it. Down in the village it was common talk. Mr. Creswell was wonderfully respected in Helmingham town, though the old people minded the day when he was thought little of. Helmingham is strictly Conservative, and when Mr. Creswell first settled himself at Woolgreaves, and commenced his restoration of the house, and was known to be spending large sums on the estate, and was seen to have horses and equipages very far outshining those of Sir Thomas Churchill of the Park, who was lord of the manor, and a county magnate of the very first order, the village folk could not understand a man of no particular birth or breeding, and whose money, it was well known, had been made in trade—which, to the Helmingham limited comprehension, meant across a counter

in a shop, "just like Tom Boucher, the draper"—attaining such a position. They did not like the idea of being patronised by one whom they considered to be of their own order; and the foolish face which had been transmitted through ten generations, and the stupid head which had never had a wise idea or a kindly thought in it, received the homage which was denied to the clever man who had been the founder of his own fortune, and who was the best landlord and the kindest neighbour in the country round. But this prejudice soon wore away. The practical good sense which had gained for Mr. Creswell his position soon made itself felt among the Helmingham folk, and the "canny" ones soon grew as loud in his praise as they had been in his disparagement. Even Jack Forman, the ne'er-do-weel of the village, who was always sunning his fat form at alehouse-doors, and who had but few good words for any one, save for the most recent "stander" of beer, had been heard to declare outside that Mr. Creswell was the "raight soort," a phrase which, in Jack's limited vocabulary, stood for something highly complimentary. The young ladies, too, were exceedingly popular. They were pretty, of a downright English prettiness, expressed in hair and eyes and complexion, a prettiness commending itself at once to the uneducated English rustic taste, which is apt to find classical features "peaky," and romantic expression "fal-lal." They were girls about whom there was "no nonsense"—cheerful, bright, and homely. The feelings which congealed into cold politeness under the influence of Marian Ashurst's supposed "superiority" overflowed with womanly tenderness when their possessor was watching Widow Halton through the fever, or tending little Madge Mason's crippled limb. The bright faces of "the young ladies" were known for miles through the country round, and whenever sickness or distress crossed the threshold they were speedily followed by these ministering angels. If human prayers for others' welfare avail on high, Mr. Creswell and his nieces had them in scores.

But the Helmingham folk did not pray much for

young Tom; on the contrary, their aspirations towards him were, it is to be feared, of a malignant kind. The warfare which always existed between the village folk and the Grammar-School boys was carried on without rancour. The farmers whose orchards were robbed, whose growing wheat was trampled down, whose ducks were dog-hunted, contented themselves with putting in an occasional appearance with a cart-whip, fully knowing, at the same time, the impossibility of catching their young and active tormentors, and with "darnging" the rising generation in general, and the youth then profiting by Sir Ranulph Clinton's generosity in particular. The village tradesmen whose windows were broken, when they discovered who were the offenders, laid on an additional item to their parents' account; when they could not bring the crime home to any boy in particular, laid on an additional item to Mr. Ashurst's account, and thus consoled themselves. Moreover, there was a general feeling that somehow, in a way that they could not and never attempted to explain, the school, since Mr. Ashurst had had it in hand, had been a credit to the place, and the canny folk, in their canniness, liked something which brought them credit and cost them nothing, and had friendly feelings to the masters and the boys.

But not to young Tom Creswell. They hated him, and they said so roundly. What was youthful merriment and mischief in other boys was, they averred, "bedevilment" in young Tom. Standing at their doors on fine summer evenings, the village folk would pause in their gossip to look after him as he cantered by on his chestnut pony—an animal which Banks, the farrier, declared to be as vicious and as cross-grained as its master. Eyes were averted as he passed, and no hat was raised in salutation; but that mattered little to the rider. He noticed it, of course, as he noticed everything in his hang-dog manner, with furtive glances under his eyebrows; and he thought that when he came into his kingdom—he often speculated upon that time—he would make these dogs pay for their

insolence. Jack Forman was never drunk; no given amount of beer—and it was always given in Jack's case, as he never paid for it—could make him wholly intoxicated; but when he was in that state which he explained himself as having "an extry pint in him," Jack would stand up, holding on by the horse-trough in front of the Seven Stars, and shake his disengaged fist at young Tom riding past, and express his wish to wring young Tom's neck. Mr. Benthall, who had succeeded Mr. Ashurst as head-master of the school, was soon on excellent terms with Mr. Creswell, and thus had an opportunity of getting an insight into young Tom's character—an opportunity which rendered him profoundly thankful that that interesting youth was no longer numbered among his scholars, and caused him much wonderment as to how Trollope, who was the curate of a neighbouring parish, who had been chosen for young Tom's private tutor, could possibly get on with his pupil. Mr. Trollope, a mild, gentlemanly, retiring young man, with a bashful manner and a weak voice, found himself utterly unable to cope with the lout, who mocked at him before his face and mimicked him behind his back, and refused to be taught or guided by him in any way. So Mr. Trollope, after speaking to the lout's father, and finding but little good resulting therefrom, contented himself with setting exercises which were never done, and marking out lessons which were never learned, and bearing a vast amount of contumely and unpleasantness for the sake of a salary which was very regularly paid.

It must not be supposed that his son's strongly marked characteristics passed unobserved by Mr. Creswell, or that they failed to cause him an immensity of pain. The man's life had been so hard and earnest, so engrossing and so laborious, that he had only allowed himself two subjects for distraction, occasionally indulged in; one, regret for his wife; the other, hope in his son. As time passed away and he grew older, the first lessened and the other grew. His Jenny had been an angel on earth, he thought, and

was now an angel in heaven, and the period was nearing, rapidly nearing, when, as he himself humbly hoped, he might be permitted to join her. Then his son would take his place, with no ladder to climb, no weary heart-burning and hard slaving to go through, but with the position achieved, the ball at his foot. In Mr. Creswell's own experience he had seen a score of men, whose fathers had been inferior to him in natural talent and business capacity, and in luck, which was not the least part of the affair, holding their own with the landed gentry whose ancestry had been "county people" for ages past, and playing at squires with as much grace and tact as if cotton-twist and coal-dust were things of which they might have heard, indeed, but with which they had never been brought into contact. It had been the dream of the old man's life that his son should be one of these. The first idea of the purchase of Woolgreaves, the lavish splendour with which the place had been rehabilitated and with which it was kept up, the still persistent holding on to business and superintending, though with but rare intervals, his own affairs, all sprang from this hope. The old gentleman's tastes were simple in the extreme. He hated grandeur, disliked society, had had far more than enough of business worries. There was plenty, more than plenty, for him and his nieces to live on in affluence, but it had been the dearest wish of his heart to leave his son a man of mark, and do it he would.

Did he really think so? Not in his inmost heart. The keen eyes which had been accustomed for so long to read human nature like a book refused to be hoodwinked; the keen sense used to sift and balance human motives refused to be paltered with; the logical powers which deduced effect from cause refused to be stifled or led astray. To no human being were Tom Creswell's moral deficiencies and shortcomings more patent than to his father; it is needless to say that to none were they the subject of such bitter anguish. Mr. Creswell knew that his son was a failure, and worse than a failure. If he had been merely

stupid there would have been not much to grieve over. The lad would have been a disappointment—as how many lads are disappointments to fond parents!—and that was all. Hundreds, thousands of stupid young men filled their position in society with average success. Their money supported them, and they pulled through. He had hoped for something better than this for his son, but in the bitterness of his grief he allowed to himself that he would have been contented even with so much. But Mr. Creswell knew that his son was worse than stupid; that he was bad, low in his tastes and associations, sordid and servile in his heart, cunning, mean, and despicable. All the qualities which should have distinguished him—gentlemanly bearing, refined manners, cultivated tastes, generous impulses—all these he lacked: with a desire for sharp practice, hard-heartedness, rudeness towards those beneath him in the social scale, boorishness towards his equals, he was overflowing. Lout that he was, he had not even reverence for his father, had not even the decency to attempt to hide his badness, but paraded it in the open day before the eyes of all, with a kind of sullen pride. And that was to be the end of all Mr. Creswell's plotting and planning, all his hard work and high hopes? For this he had toiled, and slaved, and speculated? Many and many a bitter hour did the old man pass shut away in the seclusion of his library, thinking over the bright hopes which he had indulged in as regarded his son's career, and the way in which they had been slighted, the bright what might have been, the dim what was. Vainly the father would endeavour to argue with himself, that the boy was as yet but a boy; that when he became a man he would put away the things which were not childish indeed, for then would there have been more hope, but bad, and in the fulness of time develop into what had been expected of him. Mr. Creswell knew to the contrary. He had watched his son for years with too deep an interest not to have perceived that, as the years passed away, the light lines in the boy's character grew dim and faint, and the dark lines deepened in intensity.

Year by year the boy became harder, coarser, more calculating, and more avaricious. As a child he had lent his pocket money out on usury to his schoolfellows, and now he talked to his father about investments and interest in a manner which would have pleased some parents and amused others, but which brought anything but pleasure to Mr. Creswell as he marked the keen hungry look in the boy's sunken eyes, and listened to his half-framed and abortive but always sordid plans.

Between father and son there was not the smallest bond of sympathy; that, Mr. Creswell had brought himself to confess. How many score times had he looked into the boy's face, hoping to see there some gleam of filial love, and had turned away bitterly disappointed! How often had he tried to engage the lad in topics of conversation which he imagined would have been congenial to him, and on which he might have suffered himself to be drawn out, but without the slightest success! The jovial miller who lived upon the Dee was not one whit less careless than Tom Creswell about the opinion which other folks entertained of him, so long as you did not interfere with any of his plans. Even the intended visit of Mrs. Ashurst and Marian to Woolgreaves elicited very little remark from him, although the girls imagined it might not be quite acceptable to him, and consulted together as to how the news should be broken to the domestic bashaw. After a great deal of cogitation and suggestion, it was decided that the best plan would be to take the tyrant at a favourable opportunity—at meal-time, for instance—and to approach the subject in a light and airy manner, as though it were of no great consequence, and was only mentioned for the sake of something to say. The plot thus conceived was duly carried out two days afterwards, on an occasion when, from the promptitude and agility with which he wielded his knife and fork, and the stertorous grunts and lip-smackings which accompanied his performance, it was rightly judged that Master Tom was enjoying his dinner with an extra relish. Mr. Creswell was absent—he seldom attended at the luncheon-table—

and the girls interchanged a nod of intelligence, and prepared to commence the play. They had had but little occasion or opportunity for acting, and were consequently nervous to a degree.

"Did you see much of Mrs. Ashurst in—in poor Mr. Ashurst's time, at the school, Tom?" commenced Gertrude, with a good deal of hesitation and a profound study of her plate.

"No, no, not much—quite enough!" returned Tom, without raising his head.

"Why quite enough, Tom?" came in Maude to the rescue. "She is a most delightful woman, I'm sure."

"Most charming," threw in Gertrude, a little undecidedly, but still in support.

"Ah, very likely," said Tom. "We didn't see much of her—the day-boys, I mean; but Peacock and the other fellows who boarded at Mr. Ashurst's declared she used to water the beer, and never sent back half the fellows' towels and sheets when they left."

"How disgraceful! how disgusting!" burst out Maude. "Mrs. Ashurst is a perfect lady, and—oh, what wretches boys are!"

"Screech away! I don't mind," said the philosophic Tom. "Only what's up about this? What's the matter with old Mother Ashurst?"

"Nothing is the matter with Mrs. Ashurst, your father's friend, Tom," said Gertrude, trying a bit of dignity, and failing miserably therein, for Gertrude was a lovable, kissable, Dresden-china style of beauty, without a particle of dignity in her whole composition. "Mrs. Ashurst is your father's friend, sir, at least the widow of his old friend, and your father has asked her to come and stay here on a visit, and—and we all hope you'll be polite to her." It was seldom that Gertrude achieved such a long sentence, or delivered one with so much force. It was quite plain that Mrs. Ashurst was a favourite of hers.

"Oh," said Tom, "all right! Old Mother Ashurst's coming here on a visit, is she? All right!"

"And Miss Ashurst comes with her," said Maude.

"Oh, Lord!" cried Tom Creswell. "Miss Prim coming too! That'll be a clear saving of the governor's vinegar and olives all the time she's here. She's a nice creature, she is!"

And he screwed up his mouth with an air of excessive distaste.

"Well, at all events, she's going to be your father's guest, and we must all do our best to make the visit pleasant to them," said Gertrude, who, like most people who are most proud of what they do least well, thought she was playing dignity admirably.

"Oh, I don't care!" said Tom. "If the governor likes to have them here, and you two girls are so sweet upon them all of a sudden, I say, all right. Only look here—no interference with me in any way. The sight of me mustn't make the old lady break down and burst out blubbering, or anything of that sort, and no asking me how I'm getting on with my lessons, and that kind of thing. Stow that, mind!"

"You needn't trouble yourself, I think," said Maude; "it is scarcely likely that either Mrs. or Miss Ashurst will feel very keen interest in you or your pursuits."

And out of Maude's flashing eyes, and through Maude's tightly compressed lips, the sarcasm came cutting like a knife.

But when their visitors had been but a very short time established at Woolgreaves, it became evident not merely to Mr. Creswell, but to all in the house, that Master Tom had at last met with some one who could exercise influence over him, and that some one was Marian Ashurst. It was the treatment that did it. Tom had been alternately petted and punished, scolded and spoiled, but he had never been turned into ridicule before, and when Marian tried that treatment on him he succumbed at once. He confessed he had always thought that "he could not

stand chaff," and now he knew it. Marian's badinage was, as might be supposed, of a somewhat grave and serious order. Tom's bluntness, uncouthness, avarice, and self-love were constantly betraying themselves in his conversation and conduct, and each of them offered an admirable target at which Marian fired telling shots. The girls were at first astonished and then delighted, as was Mr. Creswell, who had a faint hope that under the correction thus lightly administered his son might be brought to see how objectionable were certain of his views and proceedings. The lout himself did not like it at all. His impossibility of standing "chaff," or of answering it, rendered him for the first time a nonenity in the family circle; his voice, usually loud and strident, was hushed whenever Marian came into the room. The domestic atmosphere at Woolgreaves was far more pleasant than it had been for some time, and Mr. Creswell thought that the "sweet little girl" was not merely a "dead hand at a bargain," but that she possessed the brute-taming power in a manner hitherto undreamed of. Decidedly she was a very exceptional person, and more highly gifted than any one would suppose.

Tom hated her heartily, and chafed inwardly because he did not see his way to revenging himself on her. He had not the wit to reply when Marian turned him into ridicule, and he dared not answer her with mere rudeness; so he remained silent and sulky, brooding over his rage, and racking his brains to try and find a crack in his enemy's armour—a vulnerable place. He found it at last, but, characteristically, took no notice at the time, waiting for his opportunity. That came. One day, after luncheon, when her mother had gone up for a quiet nap, and the girls were practising duets in the music-room, Marian set out for a long walk across the hard, dry, frost-covered fields to the village; the air was brisk and bracing, and the girl was in better spirits than usual. She thoroughly appreciated the refined comforts and the luxurious living of Woolgreaves, and the conduct of the host and his nieces towards her had been so perfectly charming, that she had

almost forgotten that her enjoyment of those luxuries was but temporary, and that very shortly she would have to face the world in a worse position than she had as yet occupied, and to fight the great battle of life, too, for her mother and herself. Often in the evening, as she sat in the drawing-room buried in the soft cushions of the sofa, dreamily listening to the music which the girls were playing, lazily watching her mother cosily seated in the chimney-corner, and old Mr. Creswell by her, quietly beating time to the tune, the firelight flickering over the furniture and appointments bespeaking wealth and comfort, she would fall into a kind of half-trance, in which she would believe that the great desire of her life had been accomplished, and that she was rich—placed far above the necessity of toil or the torture of penury. Nor was the dream ever entirely dispelled. The comfort and luxury were there, and as to the term of her enjoyment, how could that be prolonged? Her busy brain was filled with that idea this afternoon, and so deeply was she in thought, that she scarcely started at a loud crashing of branches close beside her, and only had time to draw back as Tom Creswell's chestnut mare, with Tom Creswell on her back, landed into the field beside her.

"Good heavens, Tom, how you startled me!" cried Marian; "and what's the matter with Kitty? She's covered with foam, and trembling all over!"

"I've been taking it out of the blunder-headed brute, that's all, Miss Ashurst," said the lout, with a vicious dig of his spurs into the mare's sides, which caused her to snort loudly and to rear on end.—"Ah, would you, you brute? —She's got it in her head that she won't jump to-day, and I'm showing her she will, and she must, if I choose.—Stand still, now, and get your wind, d'ye hear?" And he threw the reins on the mare's neck, and turned round in his saddle, facing Marian. "I'm glad I've met you, Miss Ashurst," he continued, with a very evil light in his sullen face, "for I've got something to say to you, and I'm just in the mood to say it now."

He looked so thoroughly vicious and despicable, that Marian's first feeling of alarm changed into disgust as she looked at him and said—

"What is it, Tom?—say on!"

"Oh, I intend to," said the lout, with a baleful grin. "I intend to say on, whether you like it or not. I've waited a precious long time, and I intend to speak now. Look here. You've had a fine turn at me, you have! Chaffin' me, and pokin' your fun at me, and shuttin' me up whenever I spoke. You're doosid clever, you are, and so sharp, and all that; and I'm such a fool, I am, but I've found out your game for all that!"

"My game, Tom! Do you know what you're talking about, and to whom you are talking?"

"Oh, don't I! That's just it. I'm talking to Miss Marian Ashurst, and Miss Marian Ashurst's game is money-making! Lord bless you, they know all about it down in the village—the Crokes, and the Whichers, and them, they're full of stories of you when you was a little girl, and they all know you're not changed now. But look here, keep it to yourself, or take it away from our place. Don't try it on here. It's quite enough to have those two girls saddled on the family, but they are relations, and that's some excuse. We don't want any more, mark that. My father's getting old now, and he's weak, and don't see things so clearly as he did, but I do. I see why your mother's got hold of those girls, and how you're trying to make yourself useful to the governor. I heard you offering to go through the Home-Farm accounts the other day."

"I offered because your—because—— Oh, Tom, how dare you! You wicked, wicked boy!"

"Oh yes, I know, very likely; but I won't let any one interfere with me. You thought you were going to settle yourself on us. I don't intend it. I'm a boy—all right; but I know how to get my own way, and I means to have it. This hot-tempered brute" (pointing to the pony) "has found that out, and you'll find it out, too, before I have done with you. That's all.—Get on, now!"

The pony sprang into the air as he gave her a savage cut with his whip, and he rode off, leaving Marian in an agony of shame and rage.

CHAPTER XII.

A REMOVAL.

Some few minutes passed before Marian felt sufficiently recovered to move. The attack had been so unexpected and so brutal that she would have been perfectly paralysed by it even if the words which the boy had used had been the outpourings of mere random savagery, instead of, as they evidently were, the result of premeditated and planned insult—insult grounded on hate, and hate springing from fear. Marian's quick intelligence made that plain to her in a moment. The boy feared her, feared that she might obtain an ascendancy over his father, and get the old gentleman to advance money to Mrs. Ashurst—money that ought not to go out of the family, and should be his at his father's death—or perhaps fancied she was scheming to quarter herself at Woolgreaves, and—— Good heavens, could he have thought that! Why, the idea had never crossed her mind. She dismissed it at once, not without a half smile at the notion of the retribution she could inflict, at the thought that the boy had suggested to her what might be such a punishment for himself as she had never dreamed of.

She walked on quickly, communing with herself. So they had found her out, had they? Tom's blurted warning was the first intimation she had had that what she knew to be the guiding purpose of her life, the worship of, love for, intended acquisition of money, was suspected by any, known to any one else. No syllable on the subject, either jestingly or reproachfully, had ever been breathed to her

before. It was not likely that she would have heard of it. Her father had considered her to be perfect; her mother had set down all her small economies, scrapings, and hoardings which were practised in the household to Marian's "wonderful management;" and however the feminine portion of the Whicher and Croke families might talk among themselves, their respect for the schoolmaster and their dread of Marian's powers of retort always effectually prevented them from dropping any hints at the schoolhouse. So Marian heard it now for the first time. Yet there was nothing in it to be ashamed of, she thought; if her poor father had been guided by this sentiment his life might have been perhaps preserved, and certainly an immense amount of misery would have been spared to them all. Love of money, a desire to acquire wealth,—who should reproach her for that? Not Mr. Creswell, of whose good opinion she seemed to think first, for had not his whole life been passed in the practice, and was not his present position the result, the example to which she could point in defence of her creed? Not Maude or Gertrude Creswell, who if they had possessed the smallest spark of independence would have been earning their bread as companions or governesses. Not the people of the village, who—— Yes, by Tom's account they did talk of her; but what then? What the people in the village thought or said about her had never been of the smallest interest to Marian Ashurst when she lived among them, and was brought into daily communion with them; it was therefore not likely that she would take much heed of it now, as she had made up her mind that she and her mother must go and live in another place, far away from all old scenes and associations, when they left Woolgreaves.

When they left Woolgreaves! Hitherto she had not bestowed much thought upon that necessarily closely approaching event, but now she turned her attention to it. Under ordinary circumstances, even if things had gone on pleasantly as heretofore, if their stay had been made as comfortable to them, the attention of Mr. Creswell and his

nieces had been as great, and the general desire for them to remain as obvious, they would have had in common decency to propose some date for the expiration of their visit. And now that Tom, who had hitherto been only a negative nuisance, developed into a positive enemy, it was doubly necessary that they should take precaution not to outstay their welcome. Yes, they must go! Give up all the comforts and luxury, the fine airy rooms, the bedroom fires, the carriage drives, the good living, the wine, and attention, all of which combined had done Mrs. Ashurst so much good, and rendered her stronger and sounder than she had been for years—all these must be given up, and they must go away to poky, stivy lodgings, with dirt and discomfort of every kind; with wretched cooking which would turn her mother sick, and the attendance of a miserable maid-of-all-work, who would not understand any of their ways, and the perpetual presence of penury and want making itself felt every hour of their lives. The picture was so horrible, so repugnant to Marian, that she determined not to let it engross her thoughts in anticipation; it would be quite sufficient to cope with when it came, and she should require all her energies fresh and untaxed for the encounter. So she walked briskly on, and as she had now reached the village her attention was soon quickly absorbed by the greetings which she received, and the talk in which she had to take part.

The first greetings were from Mr. Benthall. Marian had determined that she would not go down Southwood Lane, which led to the schoolhouse, as she had no desire of encountering either master or boys in her then mood. She had not been near the school since she and her mother left the house, and she had arranged in her mind a little farewell on her part to both when she left the village. And now here was Mr. Benthall advancing straight towards her, and there was no possibility of escape, as she remembered that it was the Saturday half-holiday, and that she should probably have to run the gauntlet of a score of friends. Mr. Benthall was a brisk, lively, agreeable man, with

cheerfulness and pleasant manners, and plenty of small talk. He was, moreover, a gentleman and a man of the world, and he knew exactly how to pitch the key of his conversation to a young lady, the daughter of his predecessor, who might or might not—Mr. Benthall's experience of human nature told him might, and probably would—feel somewhat antipathetic towards him. So Mr. Benthall talked of Mrs. Ashurst, and of Mr. Creswell, and of the young ladies, and of Tom. "My friend Trollope's young charge," as Mr. Benthall spoke of him, with a somewhat malicious sparkle in his eye. And the weather was quite cold, was it not? and the frost had set in quite early, had it not? And Miss Ashurst was looking so blooming that Mr. Benthall had no need to ask her how she was, which was, indeed, the reason why he had not done so long since, but must beg her to take charge of his kindest compliments for her mother and the young ladies and Mr. Creswell. And Mr. Benthall had taken off his well-brushed hat, and had skipped across the road in his well-brushed, shapely boots, and Marian was contrasting him with that figure which was ever present to her memory—her father, bowed, and shrunken, and slatternly, and ill-dressed—when she heard her Christian name called aloud, and Dr. Osborne, in his little four-wheeled pony-carriage, drew up by her side.

"Well, Princess!" said the cheery old medico; "for since I have made you hear I may as well address you by your title—well, Princess, how goes it?"

"It goes very well indeed, dear Dr. Osborne," said Marian, returning his hand-pressure. "But why Princess?"

"Why Princess! What lower rank could a girl be who lives in a palace, over there, I mean, with 'vassals and slaves by her side,' as I've heard my girl sing years ago, and all that kind of thing?"

"But surely only a princess of the Cinderella style, my dear doctor; only enjoying the vassals and the slaves, and what you call 'that kind of thing,' for a very limited time.

Twelve o'clock must strike very soon, dear old friend, in our case, and then this princess will go back to the pots and kettles, and cinder-sifting, and a state of life worse than ever she has known before."

"God forbid, my dear!" said the doctor seriously. "Which way are you going—back again to Woolgreaves? All right. I'm driving that road, and I'll set you down at the gates. Jump in, child. I wanted a few minutes' talk with you, and this has just happened luckily; we can have it without any interruption."

He stretched out his hand and helped Marian into the seat by his side; then gave the brisk little pony his head, and they rattled cheerily along.

"Let me see, my dear, what was I saying?" said the doctor, after the silence of a few minutes. "By the way, I think I ought to have called in the village to see little Pickering, who's in for measles, I suspect. I must start a memorandum-book, my memory is beginning to fail me. What was I saying, my dear?"

"You were saying that you wanted to talk to me—about Woolgreaves, I think it must have been."

"About Woolgreaves—the palace, as I called it—oh yes, that was it. See here, child; I'm the oldest friend you have in the world, and I hope one of the truest; and I want you to answer my questions frankly, and without reserve, just as if I were your father, you know."

"I will do so," said Marian, after a faint flutter at her heart, caused by the notion of the little doctor, good little soul as he was, comparing himself with her dead father.

"That's right," said Dr. Osborne. "I knew you almost before you came into the world, and that gives me some right to your confidence. Now, then, are you happy at Woolgreaves?"

Marian hesitated a moment before she replied: "Happier than I thought I could have been—yet."

"Ah, that's right and straightforward. Mind, in all these questions I'm alluding to you, not to your mother.

I know her—charming lady, affectionate, and all that, but clinging and unreasoning, likes to lie where she falls, and so on; whereas you've got a head on your shoulders, finely developed and—so on. Now, are they all kind to you at Woolgreaves? Old gentleman kind?"

"Most kind!"

"Of course he is. Never was a man so full of heart as he is. If he had only been at home when your poor father —ah, well, that's no matter now."

"What's that you said, Dr. Osborne—that about my father?"

"Stupid old fool to go blundering into such a subject! Why couldn't I have let it alone? 'Let the dead past bury its dead.' What's that I've heard my girl sing?" the old gentleman muttered to himself. Then aloud, "Nothing, my dear. I was only thinking that if Mr. Creswell had been at home just at the time I dare say we might have made some arrangement, and had Godby down from St. Vitus, and then——"

"And then my father need not have died for the want of a hundred and thirty guineas! Oh, don't think I forget." And there came into the girl's face the hard, stony, rigid look which Dr. Osborne remembered there so well on the night of her father's death, six months before.

"Well," said the little doctor, laying the whip across his knee and blowing his nose so loudly that the pony shied at the noise—"well, well, dear, Mr. Creswell's absence at that particular time was, to say the least of it, unfortunate; we may say that. Now, what about the girls; are they kind?"

"Very, in their way."

"Good!" said the little doctor, bringing his hand down with a ringing slap on the chaise-apron, "I like that! Dry—deuced dry. Like your poor father, that. 'In their way.' Ha, ha! I understand. Their way is not much yours?"

"They are very good-tempered and polite, and press one to eat and drink a great deal, and hand chairs and

footstools, and always sing when they are asked. And," added Marian, after a moment's pause, and under a fear that she had been unduly cynical, "and they are most attentive and affectionate to mamma."

"I am delighted to hear that, for that's just as it should be, just as one would have wished it to turn out. Oh yes, quite ladies, with all the feelings and perceptions of ladies, and talking to your mother nicely, and so on. Not too bright—not to be compared with you or my girl. Ah, there would have been a companion for you, my dear; all soul, and such an arm for the harp, but married to the coastguard in Dorsetshire!—but still nice girls. Well, I'm glad you give me this account, my dear, for it suits exactly the suggestion I was about to make. But before I made it I wanted to be quite sure of your position at Woolgreaves, and to know for certain that you were liked by all the family."

"You are not certain of that yet, doctor. There is one of the family about whom you have made no inquiry."

"One of the family—at Woolgreaves? Oh, by Jove, Tom—Master Tom! I recollect now—a most important personage in his own esteem, and really some one to be thought of in such a matter as this. And how does Master Tom behave to you?"

"Like a—like a scoundrel!" cried Marian, her eyes flashing, and all the colour ablaze in her cheeks. "He has been, ever since we have been there, either rude and rough, or sulky and unpleasant; but to-day, just before I saw you, not an hour ago, he met me in the fields, and insulted me in the grossest manner; talked about our poverty, and hinted that—hinted——" and the remainder of the sentence was lost in a burst of tears.

"Happy hit of mine, that," muttered the doctor to himself. "I seem to be distinguishing myself to-day. Young ruffian, that Tom. He shall have a pretty dose next time I'm sent for to him, I'll take care.—Come, my dear, then, you must not mind; he's only a boy—a rude beastly boy, with no manners, and no heart either, and not much chest

or stomach, for the matter of that. You must not mind him. It's a pity he's not nice to you, because he has a certain power in that house; and if he were to pronounce himself as decidedly in opposition to the little scheme I had in my mind, and about which I was going to talk to you, it is very probable it might fall to the ground. But there are various ways of getting over objectionable boys. Lord bless me! in my time I've taken boys into the surgery, and brought them round by a handful of acidulated drops, and have tamed the most refractory by a Tolu lozenge."

"I scarcely think that Tom Creswell is to be bought over on such easy terms," said Marian, with a faint and weary smile. "But, doctor, what was the suggestion you were about to make?"

"Simply this, my dear: That instead of your removing into Mrs. Swainson's lodgings, which are by no means suited for you, and where I should be very sorry to see you, or into any lodging at all, you should—when I say you, I mean, of course, you and Mrs. Ashurst—should remain at Woolgreaves."

"Remain at Woolgreaves? For how long?"

"Well, as romantic or thoughtless people say, 'for ever;' at all events, until the condition of each of you is changed—by different means, let us hope."

"And under what conditions is this scheme to be realised? I suppose Mr. Creswell would scarcely take us in as boarders at Woolgreaves, doctor?"

"No, my dear child, no. You are pleased to be satirical, but I am in earnest. That the labourer is worthy of his hire is a principle that has been recognised for centuries; and you shall labour, and for hire. See here, this is how the thought first came into my head. Mrs. Caddy, the housekeeper at Woolgreaves, a very worthy woman, has been ailing of late, and came to consult me last week. Our climate don't do for her. She's a little touched in the chest, and must get away further south for the winter. I told her so plainly, and she didn't seem at all uncomfortable about it. Her friends live in Devonshire, and she's saved

a good bit of money, I should think, since she's been in Mr. Creswell's service. All that seemed to worry her was what they would do at Woolgreaves without her. She harped upon this several times, and at last a ray of light seemed to break upon her as she asked why her place should not be taken by 't' young girl, schoolmaster's daughter?'"

"Dear me! Mrs. Caddy's place taken by me?"

"By you. It was an irreverent way to speak of you, Marian my dear, I'll admit, but there was no irreverence intended. Mrs. Caddy, once set going, launched out into an interminable list of your special virtues. There never was a girl who 'cottoned' so completely to her style of pickling and preserving; there never was a girl who so intuitively grasped the great secret of making cherry-brandy, or who so quickly perceived the shortcomings of the still-room maid in the matter. And this talk of the worthy woman's gave me an idea."

"The same idea as Mrs. Caddy's?"

"The same, with a difference. Mrs. Caddy's was preposterous, mine is possible. And mine is this: When Mrs. Caddy goes, let it be understood that Mrs. Ashurst has consented to superintend the Woolgreaves household. There would be nothing derogatory in the position; all with whom she would be brought in contact would take care of that; and though she would not have the least qualification for the post, poor woman—no affront to you, my dear, but she wouldn't—you would be able to keep all smooth, and take care that everything went straight."

"But even such an establishment as Woolgreaves would not require two housekeepers, doctor?"

"Of course it would not," said the old gentleman, pleased to see by Marian's brightening face that the proposition was not so disagreeable to her. "Of course it would not. Mrs. Ashurst would be the responsible housekeeper, while your position as companion to the young ladies could be very easily defined, and would be very readily understood. Do you like the plan?"

All the details of the proposition rushed through her

mind before she spoke. Home-comforts, luxury, good living, warmth, care, attention, money, or at least the command if not the possession of money, that is what it meant, instead of a wretched lodging, a starveling income, penury, and perhaps, so far as certain necessaries for her mother were concerned, want. What would they sacrifice? Not freedom—they had never had it; and if their lives were still to be passed in drudgery, it would, at all events, be better to be the drudge of a kind old man and two insignificant girls, than of a set of rackety schoolboys, as they had hitherto been. Position? No sacrifice there; the respect always paid to them was paid to them as James Ashurst's wife and daughter, and that respect they would still continue to receive. All in the village knew them, the state of their finances, the necessity of their availing themselves of any opportunity for bettering their condition which might present itself; and out of the village they had but few acquaintances, and none for whose opinion they had the least care. So Marian, with beaming eyes and heightened colour, said—

"Yes, dear old friend, frankly, I *do* like the plan. If it were carried out an immense load of anxiety would be removed from my mind respecting mamma's immediate future, you know, and it would suit our circumstances in various ways. Is it possible? How can it be brought about?"

"You are as prompt as ever, Marian," said the doctor, smiling. "I never saw a girl retain so many of her childish characteristics." Marion winced a little as he said this, remembering Tom's remarks that afternoon on her childish character as depicted by Mesdames Whicher and Croke. "Yes, I think it is perfectly feasible, and it can be brought about by me. Mr. Creswell, having known me for many years, and believing that I never advise him but for his good, is always ready to listen to any advice I give him, and if I judge rightly, will be already predisposed to agree with this proposition, and to take it as though you and your mamma were conferring a favour on

him rather than—— Dear me, look at this foolish fellow coming towards us at full gallop! The man must be drunk.—Hallo, sir; hi, hallo!—Why, it's one of the Woolgreaves grooms, isn't it? I think I know the man's appearance.—Hallo, sir, hi! what is it?" and the little doctor pulled the chaise close into the left bank, and stood up, waving his whip, and shouting lustily.

The horseman, who was urging his horse to yet faster speed, paid no attention to the shouts, and contented himself by rising in his stirrups and waving his hand as though bespeaking a clear way, until he came close upon the chaise, when he apparently recognised its occupants, and strove to pull up his horse. With some difficulty, and not until he had shot past them, he succeeded; then turning back, he cried out—

"Dr. Osborne, I was going for you, sir. For God's sake, drive up to the house at once—you're wanted awful bad!"

"What is it?" asked the doctor.—"Quiet, my child, don't be alarmed; don't shake so.—There is nothing happened to your master?"

"No, sir; Master Tom."

"What of him—taken ill?"

"No, sir—chucked off the chestnut mare, and took up for dead in the Five Acres. Ben Pennington was bird-scarin' close by, and he see the accident and hollered out, and gave the alarm. And some of the farm-men came and got a hurdle, and put Master Tom on it, and carried him up to the house. Master see 'em coming, and ran out, and would have fell down when he see who it was, but they caught hold of him; and they say he's like a madman now, and Miss Maude, she told me to come after you. Make haste, sir, please. Hadn't you better jump on this mare, sir? she'll carry you quicker nor that cob of yourn, and I'll drive Miss Ashurst home."

"Not for any money," said the doctor; "get on that horse, indeed! There'd be another accident, and no one to be of any assistance. I shall be up at the house in a very

few minutes; ride on and say I'm coming.—Lord, my dear, fancy such an interruption to our conversation—such a bombshell bursting over the castle we were building in the air!"

"The doctor wishes to speak to you, miss, outside master's door," said Mrs. Caddy, in that hissing whisper which servants always assume in a house of sickness. "He didn't say anything about Master Tom, but his face is as white as white, and——"

"Thanks, Mrs. Caddy; I'd better go at once;" and Marian left the dining-room, where she had been doing her best to calm her mother's agitation, which expressed itself in sparse tears, and head-shakings, and deep-drawn sighs, and flutterings of her feeble hands, and ascended the stairs. As she gained the landing, the little doctor, who had evidently been on the watch, came out of a bedroom, shutting the door cautiously behind him, and hastening to her, took her hand and led her into the recess of a bay-window, round which was a luxurious ottoman.

When they had seated themselves, Marian broke silence.

"You have examined him, doctor? You know the worst?"

"I say nothing about the worst, my dear, as I just told our old friend; that is not for us to say. Poor boy! he is in a very bad way, there's no disguising that. It's a case of fracture of the skull, with compression of the brain—a very bad case indeed!"

"Does he know what has happened? Has he given any explanation of the accident?"

"None. He is insensible, and likely to remain so for some time. Now, my dear, you're the handiest person in the house, and the one with your wits most about you. This poor lad will have to be trepanned—ah! you don't understand what that is; how should you?—I mean, will have to be operated upon before he gets any relief. Under the circumstances, I don't choose to take the re-

sponsibility of that operation on myself, and, with Mr. Creswell's consent, I've telegraphed to London for one of our first surgeons to come down and operate. He will bring a professional nurse with him, but they cannot arrive until the mail at two in the morning, and as I must go down to the surgery for two or three little matters, and see some of my patients tucked up for the night, I intend leaving you in charge of that room. You have nothing to do but to keep everybody else—except, of course, Mr. Creswell—out of the room. You must not be frightened at Tom's heavy breathing, or any little restlessness he may show. That's all part of the case. Now, my child, be brave, and so good night for the present."

"Good night, doctor. Oh, one minute. You said you had telegraphed for a London surgeon. What is his name?"

"What on earth makes you ask that, you inquisitive puss?" said the old gentleman, with a smile. "Have you any choice among London surgeons? His name is Godby—Godby of St. Vitus!"

Godby of St. Vitus! That was the name. She remembered it at once. The man for whom Dr. Osborne had telegraphed to come and see her father, or rather would have sent for, but for the amount of his fee. Good God, what a contrast between that sick room and this! The boy had been carried into his father's bedroom, as nearer and larger than his own; and as Marian looked around on every side, her glance fell on signs of comfort and luxury. The room was very large, lit by a broad bay window, with a splendid view of the surrounding country; the walls were hung with exquisite proof-prints in oaken frames, a table in the centre was covered with books and periodicals, while on a smaller table close by the bed was a plate piled with splendid grapes. The bed itself, with fresh bright chintz curtains hanging over it, and a rich eider-down quilt thrown on it, stood in a recess, and on it lay the suffering lad, giving no sign of life save

his deep, heavy, stertorous breathing, and occasional restless motion of the limbs. How vividly the other room rose to her memory! She saw the ugly panelled walls, with the cracking, blistering paint, and knew the very spots from which it had been worn off. She saw the old-fashioned, lumbering bedstead, and the moreen curtains tied round each sculptured post. She remembered the roseate flush which the sunlight shed over the face of her dying father, the hopeless expression which remained there when the light had faded away. It was money, only money, that made the very wide difference between the two cases, and money could do anything. Money was fetching this clever surgeon from London, who would probably save the life of this wretched boy. What was the value of a life like this as compared to her father's? But, for the want of money, that sacred life had been suffered to pass away. Thoughts like these crowded on her brain, and worked her up to a pitch of feverish excitement during the early part of the night. She had plenty of time for reflection, for she had become accustomed to the regular heavy breathing of the patient, and no one entered the room save Mr. Creswell, who would sit for an hour together by his boy's bedside, and then, watch in hand, get up and murmur piteously: "Will the night never go! Will the man never come!"

"The man," Mr. Godby, principal surgical lecturer and demonstrator at St. Vitus's Hospital, was coming as fast as the mail-train could bring him. Unlike most of his brethren, he was essentially a man of the world, fond of studying all sorts and conditions of men, and with all his enormous practice finding time for society, theatres, music, and literature of all kinds. He was engaged out to dinner that day—to a very pleasant little dinner, where he was to have met the private secretary of a Cabinet minister, a newspaper editor, a portrait-painter, a duke, and a clerk in an insurance office, who gave wonderful imitations. The hostess was a French actress, and the cooking would have been perfect. So Mr. Godby shook his head very

mournfully over the Helmingham telegram, and had he not held his old friend Osborne in great respect, and wished to do him a service, he would have refused to obey its mandate. As it was, he resigned himself to his fate, and arrived, chilled to the bone, but bright-eyed and ready-witted, at Woolgreaves at two in the morning. He shook his head when he saw the patient, and expressed to Dr. Osborne his doubt of the efficacy of trepanning, but he proposed to operate at once.

"It's all over, mother," said Marian to Mrs. Ashurst, the next morning. "Mr. Godby was right; poor Tom never rallied, and sank at seven this morning."

"God help his poor father!" said the old lady, through her tears; "he has nothing left him now."

"Nothing!" said Marian; then added, half unconsciously—"except his money! except his money!"

CHAPTER XIII.

LIFE AT WESTHOPE.

"TEA, my lady!"

"Very well. Tell Lady Caroline—— Oh, here you are! I was just sending to tell you that tea was ready. I saw you come in from your ride before the curtains were drawn."

"Did you? Then you must have seen a pretty draggletailed spectacle. I've caked my habit with mud and torn it into shreds, and generally distinguished myself."

"Did Mr. Biscoe blush?"

"Not a bit of it. Mr. Biscoe's a good specimen of a hard-riding parson, and seemed to like me the better the muddier and more torn I became. By the way, his

wife is coming to dinner, isn't she? so I must drop my flirtation with the rector, and be on my best behaviour."

"Caroline, you are too absurd; the idea of flirting with a man like that!"

"Well, then, why don't you provide some one better for me? I declare, Margaret, you are ignorant of the simplest duties of hospitality! I can't flirt with West, because he's my brother, for one reason, and because you mightn't like it, perhaps, and because I mightn't care about it myself much. And there's no one else in the house who—— Oh, by the way, I'll speak about that just now—who else is coming to dinner?"

"Some people from the barracks—Colonel Tapp, and Mr. Frampton, the man who hunted through all those papers the other day to find the paragraph you asked him about, don't you know; a Mr. Boyd, a good-looking fair haired boy, with an eyeglass, one of the Ross-shire Boyds, who is reading somewhere in the neighbourhood with a tutor; the Biscoes, the Porters—people who live at those iron gates with the griffins which I showed you; and —I don't know—two or three others."

"Oh, heavens, what a cheerful prospect! I hate the army, and I detest good-looking boys with eyeglasses; and I've been all day with Mr. Biscoe, and I don't know the griffin people, nor the two or three others. Look here, Margaret, why don't you ask Mr. Joyce to dinner?"

"Mr. Joyce? I don't know—— Good heavens, Caroline, you don't mean Lord Hetherington's secretary?"

"I do indeed, Margaret—why shouldn't I? He is quite nice and gentlemanly, and has charming eyes."

"Caroline, I wonder at your talking such nonsense. You ought to know me sufficiently——"

"And you ought to know me sufficiently to understand there's nothing on earth I detest like being bored. I shall be bored out of my life by any of the people you have mentioned, while I'm sure I should find some amusement in Mr. Joyce."

"You might probably find a great deal of amusement in Norton, the steward, or in William, my footman; but you would scarcely wish me to ask them to dinner?"

"I think not—not in William, at all events. There is a dull decorum about Mr. Norton which one might find some fun in bearing——"

"Caroline, be quiet; you are *impayable*. Are you really serious in what you say about Mr. Joyce?"

"Perfectly—why not? I had some talk with him in the library the other day, and found him most agreeable."

"Well, then, I will send and say we expect him; will that satisfy you?

"No, certainly not! Seriously, Margaret, for one minute. You know that I was only in fun, and that it cannot matter one atom to me whether this young man is asked to join your party or not. Only, if you *do* ask him, don't send. You know the sort of message which the footman would deliver, no matter what formula had been intrusted to him; and I should be very sorry to think that Mr. Joyce, or any other gentleman, should be caused a mortification through any folly of mine."

"Perhaps you think I ought to go to him and offer him a verbal invitation?"

"Certainly, if you want him at all—I mean, if you intend asking him to dinner. You'll be sure to find him in the library. Now, I'm dying to get rid of this soaked habit and this clinging skirt! So I'm off to dress."

And Lady Caroline Mansergh gave her sister-in-law a short nod, and left the room.

Left alone, Lady Hetherington took a few minutes to recover herself. Her sister-in-law Caroline had always been a spoiled child, and accustomed to have her own way in the old home, in her own house when she married Mr. Mansergh—the richest, idlest, kindest old gentleman that ever slept in St. Stephen's first and in Glasnevin Cemetery scarcely more soundly afterwards—and generally everywhere since she had lost him. But she had been always remarkable for particularly sound

sense, and had a manner of treating objectionably pushing people which succeeded in keeping them at a distance better even than the frigid hauteur which Lady Hetherington indulged in. The countess knew this, and, acknowledging it in her inmost heart, felt that she could make no great mistake in acceding to her sister-in-law's wishes. Moreover, she reflected, after all it was a mere small country-house dinner that day; there was no one expected about whose opinion she particularly cared; and as the man was domiciled in the house, was useful to Lord Hetherington, and was presentable, it was only right to show him some civility.

So, after leaving the drawing-room on her way to dress for dinner, Lady Hetherington crossed the hall to the library, and at the far end of the room saw Mr. Joyce at work, under a shaded lamp. She went straight up to him, and was somewhat amused at finding that he, either not hearing her entrance, or imagining that it was merely some servant with a message, never raised his head, but continued grinding away at his manuscript.

"Mr. Joyce!" said her ladyship, slightly bending forward.

"Hey?" replied the scribe, in whose ear the tones, always haughty and imperious, however she might try to soften them, rang like a trumpet-call. "I beg your pardon, Lady Hetherington," he added, rising from his seat; "I had no idea you were in the room."

"Don't disturb yourself, Mr. Joyce; I only looked in to say that we have a few friends coming to dinner to-night, and it will afford Lord Hetherington and myself much pleasure if you will join us."

"I shall be most happy," said Mr. Joyce.

And then Lady Hetherington returned his bow, and he preceded her down the room, and opened the door to let her pass.

"As if he'd been a squire of dames from his cradle," said her ladyship to herself. "The man has good hands, I noticed, and there was no awkwardness about him."

"What does this mean?" said Walter Joyce, when he reached his own room and was dressing for dinner. "These people have been more civil than I could have expected them to be to a man in my position, and Lord Hetherington especially has been kindness itself; but they have always treated me as what I am—'his lordship's secretary.' Whence this new recognition? One comfort is that, thanks to old Jack Byrne's generosity, I can make a decent appearance at their table. I laughed when he insisted on providing me with dress-clothes, but he knew better. 'They can't do you any harm, my boy," I recollect his saying, 'and they may do you some good;' and now I see how right he was. Fancy my going into society, and beginning at this phase of it! I wonder whether Marian would be pleased? I wonder——"

And he sat down on the edge of his bed and fell into a dreamy abstracted state; the effect caused by Marian's last long letter was upon him yet. He had answered it strongly—far more strongly than he had ever written to her before — pointing out that, at the outset, they had never imagined that life's path was to be made smooth and easy to them; they had always known that they would have to struggle; and that it was specially unlike her to fold her hands and beg for the unattainable, simply because she saw it in the possession of other people. "She dared not tell him how little hope for the future she had." That was a bad sign indeed. In their last parting walk round the garden of the old schoolhouse at Helmingham she had hinted something of this, and he thought he had silenced her on the point; but her want of hope, her abnegation of interest, was now much more pronounced; and against such a feeling he inveighed with all the strength and power of his honest soul. If she gave in, what was to become of him, whose present discomforts were only made bearable by anticipation of the time when he would have her to share his lot?

"And after all, Marian," he had said in conclusion, "what does it all mean? This money for which you wish

so much—I find the word studding every few lines of your letter—this splendour, luxury, comfort—call it by what name you will—what does it all mean?—who benefits by it? Not the old gentleman who has passed his life in slaving for the acquisition of wealth! As I understand from you, his wife is dead, and his son almost estranged from him. Is this the end of it? If you could see his inmost heart, is he not pining for the woman who stood by his side during the conflict, and does he not feel the triumph empty and hollow without her to share it with him? Would he not sooner have his son's love and trust and confidence than the conservatory and the carriages and the splendour on which you dwell so rapturously? If you could know all, you would learn that the happiest time of his life was when he was striving in company with her he loved, and that the end now attained, however grand it may be, however above his original anticipations, is but poor and vain now she is not there to share it with him. Oh, Marian, my heart's darling, think of this, and be assured of its truth! So long as we love each other, so long as the sincerity of that love gives us confidence in each other, all will be well, and it will be impossible to shut out hope. It is only when a shadow crosses that love—a catastrophe which seems impossible, but which we should pray God to avert—that hope can in the smallest degree diminish. Marian, my love, my life, think of this as I place it before you! We are both young, both gifted with health and strength and powers of endurance. If we fight the battle side by side, if we are not led away by envy and induced to fix the standard of our desires too high, we shall, we *must* succeed in attaining what we have so often hopefully discussed—the happiness of being all in all to each other, and leading our lives together, 'for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.' I confess I can imagine no greater bliss—can you?"

He had had no answer to this letter, but that had not troubled him much. He knew that Marian was not fond

of correspondence, that in her last letter she had given a full account of her new life, and that she could have but little to say; and he was further aware that a certain feeling of pride would prevent her from too readily indorsing his comments on her views. That she agreed with those comments, or that they would commend themselves to her natural sound sense on reflection, he had no doubt; and he was content to await calmly the issue of events.

The party assembled were waiting the announcement of dinner in the library, and when Joyce entered the room Lord Hetherington left the rug where he had been standing with two other gentlemen, and, advancing towards his secretary, took his hand and said—

"I am glad her ladyship has persuaded you to come out of seclusion, Mr. Joyce. Too much—what is it?—books, and work, and that kind of thing, is—is—the deuce, in point of fact!" And then his lordship went back to the rug, and Joyce having received a sufficiently distant bow from Lady Hetherington, retreated into a darkish corner of the room, into which the flickering firelight did not penetrate, and glanced around him.

Lady Hetherington looked splendidly handsome, he thought. She was dressed in maroon-coloured velvet, the hues of which lit up wonderfully in the firelight, and showed her classically shaped head and head-dress of velvet and black lace. Joyce had read much of Juno-looking women, but he had never realised the idea until he gazed upon that calm, majestic, imperious face, so clearly cold in outline, those large, solemnly radiant eyes, that splendidly moulded figure. The man who was bending over her chair as he addressed her—not deferentially, as Joyce felt that (not from her rank, but rather her splendid beauty) she should be addressed; on the contrary, rather flippantly—had a palpable curly wig, shaved cheeks, waxed moustache, and small white hands, which he rubbed gently together in front of him. He was Colonel Tapp, a Crimean hero, a very Paladin in war, but who had been worn by time, not into slovenry, but into

coxcombry. Mr. Biscoe, the rector of the parish—a big, broad-shouldered, bull-headed man, with clean-cut features, wholesome complexion, and breezy whiskers: excellent parson as well as good cross-country man, and as kind of heart as keen at sport—stood by her ladyship's side, and threw an occasional remark into the conversation. Joyce could not see Lady Caroline Mansergh, but he heard her voice coming from a recess in the far side of the fireplace, and mingled with its bright, ringing Irish accent came the deep growling bass of Captain Frampton, adjutant of the depôt battalion, and a noted amateur singer. The two gentlemen chatting with Lord Hetherington on the rug were magnates of the neighbourhood, representatives of county families centuries old. Mr. Boyd, a very good-looking young gentleman, with crisp wavy hair and pink-and-white complexion, was staring hard at nothing through his eyeglass, and wondering whether he could fasten one of his studs, which had come undone, without any one noticing him; and Mr. Biscoe was in conversation with a foxy-looking gentleman with sunken eyes, sharp nose, and keen, gleaming teeth, in whom Joyce recognised Mr. Gould, Lord Hetherington's London agent, who was in the habit of frequently running down on business matters, and whose room was always kept ready for him.

Dinner announced and general movement of the company. At the table Joyce found himself seated by Lady Caroline Mansergh, her neighbour on the other side being Captain Frampton. After bowing and smiling at Mr. Joyce, Lady Caroline said—

"Now, Captain Frampton, continue, if you please!"

"Let me see!" said the captain, a good soldier and a good singer, but not burdened with more brains than are necessary for these professions—"let me see! Gad—'shamed to say, Lady Car'line, forgot what we were talkin' of!"

"Mr. Chennery—you remember now?"

"Yas, yas, course, thousand pardons! Well, several people who heard him at Carabas House think him wonderful."

"A tenor, you say?"

"Pure tenor, one of the richest, purest tenor voices ever heard! Man's fortune's made—if he only behaves himself!"

"How do you mean, 'behaves himself,' Captain Frampton?" asked Lady Caroline, raising her eyebrows.

"Well, I mean sassiety, and all that kind of thing, Lady Caroline! Man not accustomed to sassiety might, as they say, put his foot in it!"

"I see," said Lady Caroline, with an assumption of gravity. "Exactly! and that would indeed be dreadful. But is this gentleman not accustomed to society?"

"Not in the least; and in point of fact not a gentleman, so far as I'm led to understand. Father's a shepherd; outdoor labouring something down at Lord Westonhanger's place in Wiltshire; boy was apprenticed to a stonemason, but people staying at the house heard of his singing, sent for him, and Lord Westonhanger was so charmed with his voice, had him sent to Italy and taught. That's the story!"

"Surely one that reflects great credit on all concerned," said Lady Caroline. "But I yet fail to see why Mr. Chennery should not behave himself!"

"Well, you see, Lady Caroline, Carabas House, and that sort of thing—people he'll meet there, you know, different from anything he's ever seen before."

"But he can but be a gentleman, Captain Frampton. If he were a prince, he could be no more!"

"No, exactly, course not; but pardon me, that's just it, don't you see, the difficulty is for the man to be a gentleman."

"Not at all; not the slightest difficulty!" And here Lady Caroline almost imperceptibly turned a little towards Joyce. "If Mr. Chennery is thrown into different society from that to which he has been hitherto accustomed, and is at all nervous about his reception or his conduct in it, he has merely to be natural and just as he always has been, to avoid any affectation, and he cannot fail to please. The

art which he possesses, and the education he has received, are humanising influences, and he certainly contributes more than the average quota towards the enjoyment of what people call society."

Whether Captain Frampton was unconvinced by the argument, whether he found a difficulty in pursuing it, or whether he had by this time realised the fact that the soup was of superior quality, and worth paying attention to, are moot points; at all events, the one thing certain was, that he bowed and slightly shrugged his shoulders, and relapsed into silence, while Lady Caroline, with a half smile of victory, which somehow seemed to include Walter Joyce in its expanding ripple, replied across the table to a polite query of Mr. Biscoe's in reference to their recent ride.

She certainly was very beautiful! Joyce had thought so before, as he had caught transient glimpses of her flitting about the house; but now that he had, unnoticed and unseen, the opportunity of quietly studying her, he was astonished at her beauty. Her face was very pale, with an impertinent little nose, and deep-violet eyes, and a small rosebud of a mouth; but perhaps her greatest charm lay in her hair, which lay in heavy thick chestnut clumps over her white forehead. Across it she wore the daintiest bit of precious lace, white lace, the merest apology for a cap, two long lappels pinned together by a diamond brooch, while the huge full clump at the back, unmistakably real, was studded with small diamond stars. She was dressed in a blue-satin gown, set off with a profusion of white lace, and on her arm she wore a large heavy gold bracelet. Walter Joyce found himself gazing at her in an odd indescribable way. He had never seen anything like her, never realised such a combination of beauty, set off by the advantages of dress and surroundings. Her voice too, so bright and clear and ringing, and her manner to him—to him? Was it not to him that she had really addressed these words of advice, although they were surely said in apparent reply to Captain Frampton's comments? If that

were so, it was indeed kind of Lady Caroline, true noble-hearted kindness: he must write and tell Marian of it.

He was thinking of this, and had in his mind a picture, confused indeed, but full of small details which had a strange interest for him, and a vivid sadness too, of the contrast between the scene of which he formed at this moment a part, and those familiar to himself and to Marian. He was thinking of the homely simple life of the village, of the dear dead friend, so much a better man, so much a truer gentleman than any of these people, who were of so much importance in a world where he had been of so little; of the old house, the familiar routine of life, not wearisome with all its sameness, the sweetness of his first love. He was thinking of the splendour, the enervating bewildering luxury of his present surroundings, among which he sat so strange, so solitary, save for the subtle reassuring influence, the strange, unaccountable support and something like companionship in the tones of that fair and gracious lady's voice, in the light of her swift flitting smile, in which he thought he read an admission that the company was little more to her taste than to his, had as little in common with her intellectual calibre as with his. He could not have told how she conveyed this impression to him, if he had tried to explain his feelings to any third person; he could not explain it to himself, when he thought over the events of the evening, alone in his room, which was a dingy apartment when compared with the rest of the house, but far better than any which had ever called him master; but there it was, strong and strangely attractive, mingling with the sights and sounds around him, and with the dull dead pain at his heart which had been caused by Marian's letter, and which he had never quite succeeded in conquering. There were unshed but not unseen tears in his eyes, and a slight tremulous motion in his lips, which one pair of eyes at the table, quick with all their languor, keen with all their disdainful slowness, did not fail to see. The owner of those beautiful eyes did not quite understand, could not "fathom" the meaning of

the sudden glitter in his—"idle tears," indeed, on such an occasion, and in such company!—but, with the fine unfailing instinct of a coquette, she discerned, more clearly than Walter Joyce himself had felt it, that she counted for something in the origin and meaning of those unshed tears and of that nervous twitching.

Lady Caroline had just removed her eyes with well-feigned carelessness from Walter's face, after a covert glance, apparently casual, but in reality searching, in order to effect which she had leaned forward and plucked some geranium-leaves from a bouquet near her on the table; and Walter was removing himself still farther from the scene around, into the land of reverie, when a name spoken by Mr. Gould, and making an odd accidental harmony with his thoughts, fixed his wandering attention.

"What sort of weather had you in Hampshire?" asked Lord Hetherington, in one of those irksome pauses usually selected by some individual who is at once commonplace and good-natured enough to distinguish himself by uttering an inane sentiment, or asking an awkward question.

"Awful, I should fancy," said Lady Hetherington, in the most languid of her languid tones. "Awful, if it has been like the weather here. Were you really obliged to travel, Mr. Gould? I can't fancy any one going anywhere in such weather."

"As it happened," said Mr. Gould, with a rather impatient glance towards her ladyship—for he could not always smile complacently when she manifested her normal unconsciousness that anybody could have anything to do not entirely dependent on his or her own pleasure and convenience—"as it happened, I had not to go. A few days after I told his lordship the particulars of the sale of land, I had a letter informing me that the matter was all off for the present."

"Indeed!" said Lord Hetherington; "a doosed bore for Langley, isn't it? He has been wanting to pick up

something in that neighbourhood for a long time. But the sale will ultimately come off, I suppose, unless some one buys the land over Langley's head by private contract."

"There's no fear of that, I think," said Mr. Gould; "but I took precautions. I should not like Sir John to lose the slice off Woolgreaves he wants. The place is in a famous hunting country, and the plans are settled upon—like Sir John, isn't it?—for his hunting-box."

"I don't know that part of Hampshire at all," said Lord Hetherington, delighted at finding a subject on which he could induce one of his guests to talk without his being particularly bound to listen. "Very rich and rural, isn't it? Why didn't the—ah, the person sell the land Langley wanted there?"

"For rather a melancholy reason," replied Mr. Gould, while Lady Hetherington and the others looked bored by anticipation. Rather inconsiderate and bad taste of Mr. Gould to talk about "melancholy reasons" in a society which only his presence and that of the secretary rendered at all "mixed." But Mr. Gould, who was rather full of the subject, and who had the characteristic—so excellent in a man of business in business hours, but a little tiresome in social moments—of believing that nothing could equal in interest his clients' affairs, or in importance his clients themselves, went on, quite regardless of the strong apathy in the face of the countess. "The letter which prevented my going down to Woolgreaves on the appointed day was written by a lady residing in the house, to inform me that the owner of the property, a Mr. Creswell, very well known in those parts, had lost his only son, and was totally unfit to attend to any business. The boy was killed, I understand, by a fall from his pony."

"Tom Creswell killed!" exclaimed Walter Joyce, in a tone which directed the attention of every one at the table to the "secretary."

"I beg your pardon," Joyce went on, "but will you *kindly* tell me all you know of this matter? I know Mr.

Creswell, and I knew this boy well. Are you sure of the fact of his death?"

The paleness of Walter's face, the intensity of his tone, held Lady Caroline's attention fixed upon him. How handsome he was! and the man could evidently feel too! How nice it would be to make him feel, to see the face pale, and to hear the voice deepen, like that, for her! It would be quite *new*. She had any amount of flirtation always at hand, whenever she chose to summon its aid in passing the time; but feeling did not come at call, and she had never had much of *that* given her. These were the thoughts of only a moment, flashing through her mind before Mr. Gould had time to answer Joyce's appeal.

"I am sorry I mentioned the fact at so inappropriate a time," said Mr. Gould, "but still more sorry that there is no doubt whatever of its truth. Indeed, I think I can show you the letter." Mr. Gould wore a dress-coat, of course, but he could not have dined comfortably if he had not transferred a mass of papers from his morning-coat to its pockets. This mass he extricated with some difficulty, and selecting one, methodically indorsed with the date of its receipt, from the number, he handed it to Walter.

Lady Hetherington was naturally shocked at the infringement of the *bien-séances* caused by this unfortunate incident, and was glancing from Mr. Gould to Mr. Joyce—from one element of the "mixture" in the assembled society to the other, with no pleasant expression of countenance—when Lady Caroline came to the rescue, with gracefulness, deftness, lightness all her own, and by starting an easy unembarrassed conversation with the gentleman opposite to her, in which she skilfully included her immediate neighbours, she dissipated all the restraints which had temporarily fallen upon the party. Something interesting to the elevated minds of the party, something different from the unpleasantness of a boy being killed whom nobody knew anything about, at a place which did not belong to anybody,—and the character of the

dinner-party, momentarily threatened, was triumphantly retrieved.

Walter saw that the letter which Mr. Gould handed him was in Marian's writing. It contained an announcement of the calamity which had occurred, and an intimation that Mr. Creswell could not attend to any matters of business at present. That was all. Walter read the brief letter with sincere concern, commiseration for the childless rich man, and also with the thrill, half of curiosity, half of painless jealousy, with which one regards the familiar and beloved handwriting, when addressed, however formally, to another. He returned the letter to Mr. Gould, with a simple expression of thanks, and sat silent. No one noticed him. Every one had forgotten the dismal occurrence about somebody whom nobody knew, down in some place that did not belong to anybody. He had time to think unquestioned.

"I wonder she has not written to me. The accident occurred four days ago," he thought. "I suppose she has too much to do for them all. God bless her, she will be their best comfort."

Though unversed in the minor arts and smaller tactics of society, Walter was not so dull or awkward as to be ignorant of the skill and kindness with which Lady Caroline had acted on his behalf. When the ladies were to leave the room, as she passed him, their eyes met, and each looked at the other steadily. In her glance there was undisguised interest, in his—gratitude.

CHAPTER XIV.

LADY CAROLINE.

THE Lady Caroline liked late hours. She was of a restless temperament, and hated solitude, though she was also intolerant of anything like dulness in her associates, and had sufficient taste for the accomplishments which she possessed to render her independent of society. Nevertheless she underwent an immense deal of boredom rather than be alone, and whenever she found herself in a country house, she set to work to form a coterie of late sitters, in order to avoid the early hours which were her abhorrence. She was not an empty-headed woman—far from it. She had a good deal more knowledge than most women of her class, and a great deal of appreciation, some native humour, and much of the kind of tact and knowledge of society which require the possession and the exercise of brains. Nobody would have pronounced her stupid, but every one agreed that she was supercilious and superficial. The truth was that she was empty-hearted, and where that void exists, no qualities of head will fill it; and even those who do not know what it is they miss in the individual are impressed by the effect of the deficiency. The Lady Caroline loved no one in the world except herself, and sometimes she took that solitary object of affection in disgust, which, if transient, was deep. She had arrived at Westhope in one of those passing fits of *ennui*, mingled with impatience and disgust of herself and irritation with everybody around her. She never at any time liked Westhope particularly, and her brother and his wife had no more interest for her, no more share in her affections, than any other dull lord and lady among the number of dull lords and ladies with whom she was acquainted. Her brother loved her rather more than other people loved her, and Lady Hetherington and she, though they "got on" charmingly, knew perfectly

well that the very tepid regard which they entertained for each other had nothing in it resembling sympathy or companionship.

When the Lady Caroline retired to her own rooms after the dinner-party at which Walter Joyce had learned the news from Woolgreaves, she was no more inclined than usual to try the efficacy of a "beauty" sleep; but she was much less inclined to grumble at the dulness of Westhope, to wish the countess could contrive to have another woman or two whom she might talk to of an evening, and who would not want such a lot of sleep to be resorted to so absurdly early, and to scold her maid, than usual. The maid perceived the felicitous alteration in her ladyship's mood immediately. It made an important difference to her. Lady Caroline allowed her to remove all her ornaments and to brush her hair without finding fault with her, and surprised the patient Abigail, who must have had it "made very well worth her while" to endure the fatigues of her office, by telling her she should not require her any longer, and that she was sure she must be tired. Left to herself, the Lady Caroline did not feel so impatient of her solitude as usual, but fell into a reverie which occupied her mind completely. We have seen this nobly born, and in some respects (chiefly external) highly gifted, woman as she appeared among her brother's guests. While she sat by the fire in her dressing-room—with which she never dispensed, at any season, in "the odious English climate," as she was wont to call it—let us look into her life and see her as she really was.

Lady Caroline Mansergh had married, or rather, her mother had married her to, a gentleman of considerable importance, wealth, and more than mature years, when she was just seventeen. Very fair and very sweet seventeen, whom it had been somewhat difficult to convince of the delights and advantages of being "an old man's darling." But Lady Hetherington had not accustomed her children to gentle or affectionate treatment, or to having their inclinations consulted in any way. She no

more recognised Lady Caroline's right to choose her own husband than she would have consulted her taste in her babyhood about her own sashes; and the girl's feeble attempt at remonstrance in opposition to the solid advantages of the proposals made by Mr. Mansergh did not produce the least effect at the time. Her ladyship carried her point triumphantly, and the girl found her fate more endurable, on the whole, than she had expected. But she never forgave her mother, and that was rather odd, though not, when looked into, very unreasonable; Mr. Mansergh never forgave her either. The countess had accomplished his wishes for him, the countess had bestowed upon him the wife he coveted, but she had deceived him, and when he won his wife's confidence he found her mother out. He had not been so foolish as to think the girl loved him, but he had believed she was willing to become his wife—he had never had a suspicion of the domestic scenes which had preceded that pretty *tableau vivant* at St. George's, Hanover Square, in which every emotion proper to the occasion had been represented to perfection. Fortunately for Lady Caroline, her elderly husband was a perfect gentleman, and treated her with indulgence, consideration, and respect, which appealed successfully to her feelings, and were rewarded by a degree of confidence on her part, which insured her safety and his peace in the hazardous experiment of their unequal marriage. She told him frankly all about herself, her tastes, her feelings —the estrangement, almost amounting to dislike, which existed between herself and her mother—the attempt she had made to avoid her marriage; in short, the whole story of her brief life, in which there had been much to deplore. Mr. Mansergh possessed much firmness of character and good sense, which, though it had not preserved him from the folly of marrying a girl young enough to be his daughter, came to his aid in making the best (and that much better than could have been expected) of the perilous position. Lady Caroline did not, indeed, learn to love her husband in the sense in which alone any woman

can be justified in becoming the wife of any man, but she liked him better than she liked any one in the world, and she regarded him with real and active respect, a sentiment which she had never entertained previously for any one. Thus it fell out—contrary to the expectations of "society," which would have acted in the aggregate precisely as Lady Hetherington had done, but which would also have congratulated itself on its discernment, and exulted hugely had the matrimonial speculation turned out a failure—that Lady Caroline Mansergh was happy and respectable. She never gave cause for the smallest scandal; she was constantly with her husband, and was so naturally unaffectedly cheerful and content in his company, that not the most censorious observer could discover that he was used as a shield or a pretence. There was a perfectly good understanding between Mr. Mansergh and his young wife on all points; but if there was more complete accord on one in particular than on others, it was in keeping the countess at a distance. The manœuvring mother profited little by the success of her scheme. To be sure she got rid of her daughter at the comparatively trifling expense of a splendid *trousseau*, and the unconsidered risk of the welfare and the reputation of the daughter in question, and she had the advantage over the majority of her friends of having married her advantageously in her first season. But the profit of the transaction terminated there. In her daughter's house Lady Hetherington remained on the same ceremonious footing as any other visiting acquaintance, and every attempt she made either to interfere or advise was met by a polite and resolute coldness, against the silent obstinacy of which she would have striven unsuccessfully had she not been much too wise to strive at all. If the barrier had been reared by Lady Caroline's hands alone, though they were no longer feeble, the countess would have flung it down by the force of her imperious will; but when she found that her daughter had her husband's opinion and authority to back her, Lady Hetherington executed the strategic movement of

retreat with celerity and discretion, and would never have been suspected of discomfiture had she not spoken of her daughter henceforth with suspicious effusion. Then "society" smiled, and knew all about it, and felt that Mr. Mansergh had been foolish indeed, but not immoderately, not unpardonably so. Lady Caroline was very popular and very much admired, and had her only friend's life been prolonged for a few years, until she had passed the dangerous period of youth, she might have been as worthy of esteem and affection as she was calculated to inspire admiration. But Mr. Mansergh died before his wife was twenty-three years old, and left her with a large fortune, brilliant beauty, and just sufficient knowledge of the world to enable her to detect and despise its most salient snares, but with a mind still but half educated, desultory habits, and a wholly unoccupied heart. Her grief for her husband's loss, if not poignant and torturing, was at least sincere, deep, and well founded. When he died, she had said to herself that she should never again have so true, so wise, and so constant a friend, and she was right. Life had many pleasant and some good things in store for Lady Caroline Mansergh, but such a love as that with which her husband had loved her was not among them. She acknowledged this always; the impression did not fade away with the first vehemence of grief—it lasted, and was destined to deepen. She strayed into a bad "set" before long, and to her youth and impulsiveness, with her tendency to *ennui*, and her sad freedom from all ties of attachment, the step from feeling that no one was *so* good as her husband had been, to believing that no one else was good at all, was very easy. And so Lady Caroline acquired a dangerous and demoralising trick of contempt for her fellows, which she hid under a mask of light and careless good-nature indeed, and which was seriously offensive to no one, but which condemned her, nevertheless, to much interior solitude and dreariness. That she was not *of* the world she lived in, was due less to any exceptional elevation of sentiment than to a capricious and disdainful

humour, which caused her to grow bored very readily, and to dismiss her associates from her thoughts after a brief scrutiny, in which their follies and foibles came into strong light, and the qualities which would have required time and patience to find out remained undiscovered.

It had occurred to Lady Caroline Mansergh, on several occasions of late, to wonder whether she was destined ever to experience the passion called love. She had not remained ignorant of the science of flirtation up to her present time of life, but she had not been beguiled, ever so briefly, into mistaking any of her flirtations for love. So she was accustomed to wonder wearily, when in an unusually desultory mood, whether she should ever feel that there existed in the world a human being for whom she should be willing to suffer, with whom life would be happy, without whom it would be intolerable, and whose welfare she could deliberately and practically prefer to her own. Of late she had begun to think that Fate was against her in this particular. The idea of the possibility of feeling love for one of the men whom she was in the habit of meeting was quite preposterous; she did not hold her favourite followers half so dear as Hassan, her black barb, or like them half so well as Gelert, her greyhound. Her life would doubtless continue to be the bright, fashionable, flimsy, careless, rather *ennuyé* existence it had hitherto been, and she should never know anything of the power, the pain, the engrossing influence of love. So much the better, she would think, in her more hopeful moods; it must be a narrowing kind of influence, bounding all one's horizon within such small limits, shutting up one's mortal vista with one figure.

When the Lady Caroline dismissed her maid, and resigned herself to reverie, on this night, it was not, after her accustomed fashion, to dwell in her thoughts on the dulness, staleness, flatness, and unprofitableness of the world in general, and the section of it in which she lived in particular. She had quite a distinct subject for thought, she had a figure and a face in her fancy, a voice

in her memory which filled them wholly. What if she had been wrong, if not only love were coming to her, to fill her life with delight, and turn its weariness with purpose and meaning, but love at first sight? A ridiculous notion, entertained by school-girls, housemaids, novelists, and poets, but scouted by all reasonable people of the world, and in "society." She knew this, but she did not care; there was a strange delicious thrill about her heart; and in the swift flight of her thoughts she swept the beams of happy possibilities, and felt that she could, and would, and did despise society and its notions on this point.

What did she know about Walter Joyce? Absolutely nothing, but that he was young, handsome, brightly intelligent, presumably poor, and socially insignificant, or he would not be her silly brother's secretary. Her attention had been directed to him at first, because she felt a compassionate curiosity about the person whom circumstances had oppressed so cruelly as to oblige him to purvey ideas, and language in which to express them, for Lord Hetherington. Curiosity and compassion had been replaced, within a few minutes, by admiration, which the difference between the manners and bearing of Walter, and those of the men with whom she was accustomed to associate, rather tended to increase. There was no awkwardness about Walter, but neither was there the slightest pretence. He was at ease in the unaccustomed company he found himself among, but he did not affect to be other than an observant stranger in it.

"He has an intellect and a heart," said Lady Caroline half aloud, as she rose from her seat by the fireside, and brought her reverie to a conclusion, "and why should I care for the world's opinion? It could not make me happy, if I conciliated it; but I think *he* could, if I defied it for his sake."

CHAPTER XV.

"NEWS FROM THE HUMMING CITY."

After the ladies left the dining-room, Walter Joyce, in the general re-arrangement of seats thereon ensuing, found himself placed next to Mr. Gould. It was soon obvious that his propinquity was not accidental on Mr. Gould's part. That keen-looking gentleman at once wheeled round in his chair, helped himself to a few olives and a glass of the driest sherry within his reach, and then fixing his bright steel-blue eyes on his neighbour, said—

"That was news for you, that about young Creswell's accident, Mr. Joyce?"

"It was indeed," replied Walter; "and—to a certain extent—sad news."

"You knew the boy who was killed, and his father?"

"Both. I knew the boy well; he was a pupil in the school where I was an usher, and I knew the father—by sight—as a man in my position would know a man in his."

"Ah—of course!" and Mr. Gould glanced more keenly than ever at his interlocutor, to see whether he was speaking earnestly or contemptuously. Earnestly, he thought, after a glance, and Joyce fell a little in the worldly man's opinion. He sucked an olive slowly, made a little pattern on his plate with the stones, and then said, "Do you think this affair will make any difference in Mr. Creswell's future?"

"In his future? Will the loss of his son make any difference in his future? Are you serious in asking such a question, Mr. Gould? Will it not leave his life a blank, a vague misery without——"

"Yes, yes, of course; I know all about that. You'll pardon me, Mr. Joyce, I'm a much older man than you, and therefore you won't mind my experiencing a certain

amount of delight in your perfect freshness and simplicity. As to leaving the man's life blank, and all that —nonsense, my dear sir, sheer nonsense. He'll find plenty of distraction, even at his age, to fill up the blank. Now, I was not considering the question from a domestic point of view in the least; what I meant was, do you think that it will alter any of his intentions as regards public life?"

"Public life?—Mr. Creswell?"

"Yes, indeed, public life, Mr. Creswell! I suppose now there's no harm in telling you that the Conservative authorities in London, the wire-pullers in Westminster, have long had it in their minds to wrest the seat for Brocksopp from the Liberals, that at the next general election they have determined to make the fight, and they have selected Mr. Creswell as their champion."

"Mr. Creswell of Woolgreaves—going into Parliament?"

"Well, that's rather a summary way of putting it, Mr. Joyce," said the lawyer, with a chuckle. "Say rather, going to try to get into Parliament! Bidwell, of Brocksopp, the Liberal agent, is a deuced long-headed fellow, and will make a tremendous struggle to keep Mr. Creswell out in the cold. Do you know Bidwell, of Brocksopp?"

"I have a slight acquaintance with him."

"Then you've a slight acquaintance with a remarkably sharp character, and one who never misses a chance for his party. It will be a tremendous fight, sir, this next election," said Mr. Gould, warming up, placing all his olive-stones in a row, and charging at them with his dessert-knife; "they'll do all they can to beat us, and we shall have to do all we know to hold our own. When I say 'we,' of course I reckon you as a Conservative."

"I—I have no political opinions. I take no interest in politics," said Joyce absently.

Mr. Creswell, from any but a domestic point of view, could not rouse an emotion in him.

"Don't you indeed? No political opinions? Ah, I

remember when I hadn't any myself. That was—dear me!" and the astute parliamentary agent made a new pattern with the olive-stones, while his thoughts went back for a quarter of a century, to a time when he was under articles in Gray's Inn, used to frequent the Cider Cellars, and was desperately in love with the columbine of the Adelphi.

They went to the drawing-room soon afterwards. There was some instrumental music of the most approved firework style, and then Captain Frampton growled away at "Il Balen" with great success, and Joyce was just making up his mind to slip away, when Lady Caroline Mansergh sat down to the piano, and began to sing one of Moore's melodies to her own accompaniment. Ah, surely it is not laying one's self open to the charge of fogeyism to grieve over the relegation to the "Canterbury" of those charming ballads, wherein the brightest fancies were wedded to the sweetest sounds? If the "makers of the people's ballads" possess the power ascribed to them, there is, indeed, but little cause to wonder at the want of tone prevalent in a society, which for its drawing-room music alternates between mawkish sentimentality and pot-house slang. When the first note of Lady Caroline's rich contralto voice rippled round the room, the guests standing about in small knots, coffee-cup in hand, gradually sidled towards the piano, and ere she had sung the first stanza even Colonel Tapp's ventriloquial grumbling—he was discussing army estimates, and the infernal attempts at cheeseparing of the Manchester School—was hushed. No one in the room was uninfluenced by the singer's spell, on no one had it so much effect as on Walter Joyce, who sat far away in the shadow of a curtain, an open photograph-book unheeded on his knee, drinking in the melody and surrendering himself entirely to its potent charms. His eyes were fixed on the singer, now on her expressive face, now on her delicate little hands as they went softly wandering over the keys, but his thoughts were very, very far away. Far away in the old school

garden, with its broad grass-plots, its ruddy wall, its high elm trees, frame-like bordering the sweet domestic picture. Far away with Marian, the one love which his soul had ever known. Ah, how visibly he saw her then, the trim figure noiselessly moving about on its domestic errands, the bright beryl eyes upturned in eager questioning towards his own, the delicate hand with its long thin fingers laid in such trusting confidence on his arm! What ages it seemed since he had seen her! what a tremendous gulf seemed ever to separate them! And what prospect was there of that union for which they had so fervently prayed? The position he was to gain—where was that? What progress had he made in—"friends once linked together I've seen around me fall, like leaves in wintry weather!" Ay, ay, the poor old dominie, at rest—better there than anywhere else, better to be out of the strife and the worry, and—good heavens! was this what he had promised her? was this the courage on which he had prided himself, and which was to carry him through the world? "Brava! brava! Oh, thank you so very much, Lady Caroline. Mayn't we hope for another? Thanks, so much!" The song was over; the singer had left the piano. He caught one glance as he bowed and murmured his thanks. He could not stand it any longer, his thoughts had completely unmanned him, and he longed for solitude. If it were rude to leave the party he must brave even Lady Hetherington's wrath, but he would try and get away unobserved. Now, while the hum of admiration was still going on, and while people were gathering round Lady Caroline, was the opportunity. He availed himself of it, slipped away unperceived, and hurried to his own room.

He closed the door behind him, turned the key, and flung himself on to the bed, in the dark. He felt that he could contain himself no longer, and now that he was alone and unseen, there was no further reason to restrain the tears which had been welling into his eyes, and now flowed unchecked down his cheeks. He was a man of

nervous temperament, highly wrought susceptibilities, and acute sympathies, which had been over-excited during the evening by the story of Tom Creswell's death, his own recollections of his past life, and the weird thought-compelling power of Lady Caroline's music. There was no special occasion for these tears; he knew nothing had happened to Marian, nothing—no, nothing had happened calculated in any way to interpose any—any barrier between them; his position was pleasant, his prospects brighter than he could have hoped—and yet, and yet! How very strange that she had not written lately!—unless, indeed, she had been completely absorbed by ministering to the trouble round her. Walter could easily picture to himself the comfort she must have been to all in the midst of the desolation which had fallen upon that hitherto prosperous house; he recollected how even in the midst of her own deep sorrow she had been able, at the time of her father's death, to rouse her mother from the lethargic state of grief into which she had fallen; and if Marian could do that then, while her own heart was bleeding, how much more would she be able to bestir herself now, when neither for the dead, nor for those left behind, had she anything but a kindly interest? And might not this sad event prove a useful lesson to her; might it not prove the one thing needful to render her a perfect character, showing her, as it would, that there are worse misfortunes than poverty, and that grief can slip in behind the shields of wealth and position, and abase the heads of their possessors to the dust? That longing for money and worship of position was the only blot in Marian's character, as seen by Walter Joyce's eyes, and if this accident led to its eradication, it would not have been without its beneficent purpose.

He rose from the bed, and felt his way towards his dressing-table. As he was groping for the matches, his hand fell upon an unopened letter. From Marian, without a doubt; he felt his heart throbbing; at once he struck a light and looked hurriedly for the familiar

writing. No, not from Marian! Totally unlike her square neatly written notes; a large blue letter, directed in a straggling hand, and awkwardly folded. Though Joyce was disappointed and vexed for an instant, he quickly recovered himself, and he took the letter up and smiled at it pleasantly, for he had recognised the style and the writing, and he knew that it had come from old Jack Byrne.

Thus it ran:

"London, Thursday.

"MY DEAR BOY,

"You'll wonder I haven't answered that capital letter you sent me, giving a description of Westhope and its people, and your life there. You'll wonder, because you are young; when you're as old as I am you won't wonder at anything, except when you sometimes find a man tell the truth; but you shouldn't wonder then, because it would only be an accident. I am very glad that you seem to be so comfortable among the swells, but I never had much fear about it. I know them root and branch, the whole lot, though I'm only an old bird-stuffer; but I'm like Ulysses, I've seen men and cities, and used my eyes—used 'em so much that, by Jove! I don't think they'll last me much longer—at least, for the fine work in my business. What was I saying? Oh, I see; I know the swells, and I know that if they see a man respect himself they always respect him. All of 'em, sir; don't make any mistake about it. All of 'em, the most ineffable transparencies, who think you're sewn up and stuffed in quite a different way from themselves, the kindly noodles, and the clever people—for there are clever people, a few, even among swells—all like to see a man respect himself. You'll have found out by this time, if you did not know it before, that Lord Hetherington is one of the kindly noodles, and one of the best of 'em. He can't help believing in his blood, and his lineage, and his descent from those bloodthirsty, ignorant old ruffians of the Middle Ages, whose only good was that they killed other blood-

thirsty, ignorant old ruffians, and he can't help being a fool, that being the penalty which a man generally has to pay for being able to boast of his descent; but he is harmless and kind-hearted. How goes on the book? Take my advice, and make it light and anecdotical. Boil down those old chronicles and parchments of the great West family, and serve them up in a *soufflet*. And don't let your heavy pedagogical style be seen in the dish! If you do, everybody will know at once that my lord has had nothing to do with the book on the title-page of which his name figures. I suppose it wouldn't do to put in any bad spelling, would it? That would be immensely reassuring to all who know Lord Hetherington as to the real authorship.

"And my lady, how is that *grande dame*? I've grinned a hundred times, thinking over your face of indignation and disgust at the manner in which she received you that day we went to call on their magnificences at the Clarendon, with a view to your engagement! How does she treat you now? Has she ordered you to black her boots yet, or to wash her lap-dog, or to take your meals with her lady's-maid? Or, more likely still, has she never taken any notice at all of you, having no idea of your existence, beyond the fact that there is a writing-machine —you—in the library, as there is a churn in the dairy, and a mangle in the laundry! And does this behaviour gird you, and do you growl inwardly about it, or are you a philosopher, and able to despise anything that a woman can do to hurt you? If the latter, come up to town at once, and I will exhibit you in a show as a *lusus naturæ*, and we will divide the profits and make our fortunes.

"And while on that subject, Walter, let me drop my old cynical fun, and talk to you for a minute honestly and with all the affection of which my hard, warped, crabbed nature is capable. I can write to you what I couldn't say to you, my boy, and you won't think me gushing when I tell you that my heart had been tight locked and barred for years before I saw you, and that I don't think I've

been any the worse since you found a key somehow—God knows how—to unlock it. Now, then, after that little bit of maudlin nonsense, to what I was going to say. The first time we were ever in my old room together talking over your future, I proposed to start you for Australia. You declined, saying that you couldn't possibly leave England; and when I pressed you about the ties that bound you here, and learned that you had no father or mother, you boggled, and hesitated, and broke down, and I was obliged to help you out of your sentence by changing the subject. Do you remember all that? And do you think I didn't know what it all meant? That marvellous stupidity of young men, which prevents them from thinking that any one has ever been young but themselves! I knew that it meant that you were in love, Walter, and that's what I want to ask you about. From that hour until the day we pressed hands in farewell at Euston Square, you never alluded to her again! In the long letter which you sent me, and which now lies before me, a letter treating fully of your present and your future life, there is no word of her! Don't think I am surprised at a fine, generous, hearty, hopeful young fellow not giving his love-confidence to a withered, dried-up old skittle like myself; I never expected it; I should not mention it now, save that I fear that the state of affairs can be scarcely satisfactory between you, or you, who have placed your whole story unreservedly before me, would not have hidden this most important part of it. Nor do I want to ask you for a confidence which you have not volunteered. I only wish you to examine the matter calmly, quietly, and under the exercise of your common sense, of which you have plenty. And if it is unsatisfactory in any way—*give it up!* Yes, Walter, give it up! It sounds harshly, ridiculously, I know, but it is honest advice, and if I had had any one to say it to me years and years ago, and to enforce my adoption of it, I should have been a very different man. Believe in no woman's love, Walter; trust no woman's looks, or words, or vows. 'First of all would

I fly from the cruel madness of love,' says Mr. Tennyson, and he is right. Cruel madness, indeed! we laugh at the wretched lunatic who dons a paper crown, and holds a straw for a sceptre, while all the time we are hugging our own tinsel vanities, and exulting in our own sham state! That's where the swells have the pull, my boy! They have no nonsense about mutual love, and fitness, and congeniality, and all that stuff, which is fitted for nothing but valentine-mongers and penny-romancists; they are not very wise, but they know that the dominant passion in a man's heart is admiration of beauty, the dominant passion in a woman's is ambition, and they go quietly into the mart and arrange the affair, on the excellent principle of barter. When I was your age I could not believe in this, had high hopes and aspirations, and scouted the idea of woman's inconstancy —went on loving and hoping and trusting, from month to month, and from year to year, wore out my youth and my freshness and my hope, and was then flung aside and discarded, the victim of 'better opportunities' and 'improved position.' Oh, Lord! I never intended to open my mouth about this, but if you ever want to hear the whole story, I'll tell you some day. Meanwhile, think over these hints, my boy! Life's too short and too hard as it is, and—*verbum sap.*

"Most probably you'll never take any further notice of me, after that. If you have corns, I must have been hard and heavy upon them, and you'll curse my impertinence; if you haven't, you'll think me the prosiest of old bores. Just like me. I see plainly that I must have made a mess of it, whichever way it turns up.

"You tell me to send you news. Not much about; but what there is, encouraging and good for the cause. There is very little doubt that at the general election, which will come off in a few months, we shall be stronger by far than we ever expected, and shall cut the combs of some of those aristocrats and plutocrats very close indeed. There is a general feeling that blood and money-

bags have divided the spoil too long, and and that worth and intellect may be allowed a chance of being brought into play. There are three or four men at the club, whom you know, and who are tolerably certain of seats, and who, if once they get the opportunity of making their voices heard in Parliament, will show the world of what stuff real Englishmen consist. Who do you think is helping us immensely? Shimmer, he of Bliffkins's! He has got an engagement on the *Comet*—a new journal which has just started in our interest, and he is writing admirably. A good deal of Lemprière's dictionary, and Bohn's quotations, and Solomon's proverbs, mixed up with a dashing incisive style and sound Saxon English, has proved immensely telling. People are buying the *Comet* everywhere, and Shimmer's salary has been twice raised, and he has been applied to for his photograph. He does not come much to Bliffkins's now, greatly to old Wickwar's relief. The old gentleman has expressed his opinion that since Robsperry (he is supposed to have meant Robespierre) there has been no such sanguinary democrat as Shimmer. When will you come back to us, Walter? I look at the place where I used to see you sitting, before I ever spoke to you; I sit and stare at it now until I feel my eyes—— D—d old fool!

"Good-bye, boy. Let me hear from you again soon. You know what you promised if ever you wanted money or anything. J. B.

"Opened again to say Shimmer has been here inquiring after you. *Comet* people want a correspondent at Berlin—special and important. S. thinks you'll do. Will you go? J. B."

The company had long since departed from Westhope; the family had long since retired to rest; dim lights glimmered here and there in the windows; but Walter Joyce remained sitting on the side of his bed, with Jack Byrne's open letter in his hand. When he wrote it the old man little thought what a field of painful speculation he had laid open for its recipient.

CHAPTER XVI.

"HE LOVES ME; HE LOVES ME NOT."

THE interest which Walter Joyce had awakened in Lady Caroline Mansergh on the night of the dinner-party by no means died out, or even waned. Flirtation is certainly not an exceptional amusement in the dead level of dreary occupations which a country-house life affords, but this word-pastime was certainly not flirtation. The notion of flirting with her brother's secretary, which would have been exceedingly comic to the rest of the world, and afforded a vast deal of amusement to the kindly noodle portion of the Westhope society, did not strike Lady Caroline at all in a ridiculous light; but to flirt with Walter Joyce she knew would be impossible. The sighing and looking, the giving and taking, the fetching and carrying, and all the poodle tricks which are played by the best style of male flirts, in the best style of society, she knew would be impossible to him; and though she had had long practice in the art, and had derived no little amusement from it, she felt it would be repulsive to her to try her hand on such a subject. If not a desire for flirtation, what was it that irresistibly impelled her to seek this man's society; that made her start and thrill at the unexpected sound of his voice; that enabled her to picture to herself so vividly certain expressions in his eyes, gestures of his hands, to recall phrases of his conversation? Was it real passion? Had love come to her at last? Was this the man with whom her fate was to be for ever bound up? Lady Caroline half smiled as she contemplated this tremendous possibility. It was too wild, too romantic, this story of the Lord of Burleigh with the sexes reversed, and with herself for heroine; the man was different from those with whom her life had been passed, had brains and courage to use them, did not think the society thoughts

nor speak the society language, and was not comformable in any way to the society pattern. That was what it meant. That was the source of the strange interest she felt in him—interest which was friendly and appreciative, but nothing further.

Nothing further. That was why she had manœuvred, carefully, skilfully, and with perfect feminine tact, never ceasing until the object was accomplished, that it was understood that Mr. Joyce joined the family circle always after dinner, whether there were visitors or not; that was why she invariably found opportunities to have him seated by her side, or standing by her turning over the pages of her music, while Lord Hetherington, with a dexterity only acquired by long practice, held up the newspaper before him, being at the time sound asleep, and her ladyship, scorning concealment, slumbered placidly in the garish light of the moderator lamp.

Nothing further. That was why Lady Caroline had suddenly taken to pedestrian exercise, wanted an escort occasionally to the village, and hated the idea of being followed about in the country by a footman; found she had quite forgotten that charming Shakespeare, and determined to read his dear plays again, and would not trouble Mr. Joyce to send those heavy big volumes from the library, but would come in and read them there occasionally, if he was quite sure she did not disturb him. The jealous tortures endured by the valiant Othello, which Lady Caroline selected for her first Shakespearian reading, apparently did not interest her very much. The great family history of the Wests, derived from ancient chronicles and documents, upon which Lord Hetherington's secretary was engaged, made but little progress on the occasions of her ladyship's visits. There were the longest and the pleasantest talks. In Caroline Mansergh's hands Joyce was as pliable as potter's clay. In less than a week after the dinner-party he had told her the history of his life, made her acquainted with his hopes and fears, his wishes and aspirations. Of course she heard about his engagement to

Marian; equally of course that was the part of the story in which she felt and shared the greatest interest. Very quickly she knew it all. Under her skilful questioning, Joyce not merely told her what had actually occurred, but opened to her the secret chambers of his heart, and displayed to her penetrating sense feelings with the existence of which he himself was scarcely acquainted. The odd uncomfortable sensation which first came over him in his last walk with Marian round the school garden, when she spoke of how it might have been better if they had never met, and how poorly armed he was for the great conflict of life, the renewal of the sting with its bitterness increased fifty-fold at the receipt of her letter dilating on the luxury of Woolgreaves, and her dread of the poverty which they would have to encounter, the last hint given to him in the worldly advice contained in Jack Byrne's letter—all these were submitted to Lady Caroline's keen powers of dissection, without Walter's being in the least aware how much of his inner life he had made patent to her. A look, a nod, a word here or there, begat, increased, and developed his assurance of sympathy; and he could have talked till all eternity on the subject dearest to his heart.

Lady Caroline let him talk, and only starred the dialogue with occasional interjections, always of a sympathising character. When she was alone, she would sit for hours reviewing the conversation just past in the minutest detail, weighing and reweighing sentences and even words which Joyce had spoken, sifting, balancing, ascribing to such and such influences, putting aside such and such theories, bringing all her feminine wits—and in the great points of feminine cleverness, an odd common sense, and an undefinable blundering on to the right, she had no superior—to the solution of the question of Walter Joyce's future so far as Marian Ashurst was concerned. Whatever conclusion she may have arrived at she kept to herself; no one ever had the slightest glimmering of it. Her talks with Walter Joyce were as numerous as ever, her interest in his career no less, her delight in his society by no means im-

paired; but the name of Miss Ashurst never passed Lady Caroline's lips, and whenever she saw the conversation necessarily veering that way, she invariably struck it out into some new channel. Not that Lady Caroline Mansergh had any jealousy of this "simple maiden in her flower;" she would not have allowed that for an instant, would not have allowed, in her most secret communings with herself, that such a thing could be possible; for she had been properly and rigidly brought up in the Belgravian code of morals, though a little inclined to kick against them now and think for herself; and the Belgravian code of morals holds the cultivation of the *bien-séances* as the most essential portion of a young lady's curriculum, and the *bien-séances* effectively ignored the existence of any such low sentiment as jealousy in the minds of perfectly constituted members of the upper classes. Not that Walter Joyce would have noticed the display of any such passion as jealousy, or, as Lady Caroline thought rather ruefully, could allow any such feeling to be excited in him. In all her experience—and it had been large and vast—she had never come across a man so completely—— Well, she could scarcely find a term for it. It was not apathetic, because he was bright and intelligent and earnest. Perhaps confiding was the best word to use so far as his relations with Marian were concerned, though, as Lady Caroline felt, those relations were a little dashed with recent doubt; and as for his feelings with regard to herself, skilled mistress as she was in the art of such wordy warfare, Lady Caroline could never trap him into an ambuscade, or force him into anything like an acknowledgment of a liking for her. It was not for the want of trying to evoke it, not for lack of given opportunity on her part, that this avowal never was made. Fortune favoured her, notably on one occasion; and if Walter Joyce had ever contemplated anything beyond a feeling of pleasant friendship for Lady Caroline Mansergh, he would have availed himself of that occasion for expressing it. Thus it came about. Lady Caroline was sitting half buried in a

big soft easy-chair before the library fire, presumably enjoying *Othello*, but really watching her brother's secretary, who was busily transcribing from a big black-letter volume before him some of the glorious deeds of her remote ancestry. Raising his eyes after one of his pen-dips, Joyce met Lady Caroline's glance fixed straight upon him, and said—

"Thinking of Iago's subtlety, Lady Caroline, or Desdemona's innate weakness? The former, I should say, judging from your expression."

"My expression must be very poor, then, Mr. Joyce, or your powers of reading expression must be extremely limited. I was thinking of something totally different."

"May one ask of what?"

He had had a long day at the chronicles of the West family, and a little relief was absolutely necessary.

"Oh dear, yes; my thoughts were certainly not to be marked 'confidential' or even 'private.' I was thinking about our going back to town."

"Oh, indeed! Is that imminent?"

"I should say certainly. Parliament meets within a fortnight, and West, I mean Lord Hetherington, never misses that. Lady Hetherington won't let him go alone, and once in Beaufort Square, I suppose they'll stop on."

"I suppose so. This house will seem wonderfully different when you have all left it."

"Naturally. Deserted houses must be different to those filled with company, though their actual appearance is of course only known to the housekeeper who is left in them, and housekeepers seldom give their impressions to the world."

"If you are interested in the subject, perhaps you will permit me to give you a faithful photograph of Westhope in its dismantled state."

"Evolved from your inner graciousness, like the German's idea of the camel?"

"On the contrary, drawn in the minutest detail from personal observation. The exact position of the pen which

Lord Hetherington threw down after signing his last cheque for Mr. Deacon, the steward, the state of the withering hothouse flowers left by her ladyship on her table in the drawing-room, the vacant chair in the library once filled by——"

"Thanks, that's enough! I won't trouble you to be poetical, Mr. Joyce; that will be wanted one day at Helmingham, I suppose, and it's never wise to be extravagant with one's ideas. But you don't mean to say you think you will be left behind here, at Westhope, when the family returns to town?"

"Assuredly, Lady Caroline! How else should I be able to make any progress with my work?"

"I think you will find," said Lady Caroline, with a smile, "that the history of our family, wonderfully interesting as it doubtless is, and anxiously expected by the literary world, as it necessarily must be, will have to remain in abeyance for a little time. The fact is, that Lord Hetherington has been recently much struck with the levelling and democratic spirit of the age, and has determined, so far as he is able, to stem the torrent. He will need a certain amount of assistance before bringing the matter before the House of Lords, and for that assistance I know he looks to you!"

He was a trying man, this Mr. Joyce. There was a scarcely suppressed gleam of fun in Lady Caroline's usually earnest eyes that ought to have conveyed to any man acquainted with the circumstances of the position the fact that this new combination had been suggested by her, and by her alone, and that she perfectly appreciated not merely its serviceable but its ludicrous side. Walter Joyce appreciated neither. He should of course be ready to give his services in whatever way they might be required, he said, adding with clumsy candour that he had been almost looking forward to the time of the family's departure for the additional facilities which would be afforded him in getting on with his work.

This was too much for Lady Caroline. A flush passed across her cheek, as she said—

"It has been Lady Hetherington's accidental, and by no means wilful error, Mr. Joyce, that your time has been already so much intruded on. We have, unfortunately for us no doubt, been unaccustomed to the ways of recluses, and have preposterously imagined that a little society might be more agreeable to them than——"

But here she stopped, catching sight of the troubled expression on his face, of his downcast eyes and twitching lips. There was silence for a moment, but he soon mastered his emotion.

"I see plainly that I have blundered, as was not unnatural that I should, through the lack of power of expressing myself clearly. Believe me, Lady Caroline, that I am infinitely indebted to Lord and Lady Hetherington, and to you especially. Yes, indeed, for I know where the indebtedness lies—more especially to you for all the kindness you have shown me, and the notice you have taken of me. And I—I intended——"

"Will you prove the truth of your protestations by never saying another word on the subject? The give-and-take principle has been carried out in our society as much as the most ardent democrat, say yourself, Mr. Joyce, could have desired. I am sure you are too good-natured to mourn over the hours torn from your great work and frittered away in frivolous conversation when you know that you have helped Lady Hetherington and myself to undergo an appalling amount of country people, and that while the dead Wests may grieve over the delay in the publication of their valour and virtue, the living Wests are grateful for assistance rendered them in their conflict with the bores. However, all that is nearly at an end. When the family is at Hetherington House, I have no doubt you will be enabled to enjoy the strictest seclusion. Meantime, there is only one festivity that I know of which is likely to cause us to ask you to tear yourself away from your chronicles."

"And that is?"

"A skating-party. Consequently dependent on the

state of the weather. So that if you are still hermitically inclined, you had better pray for a thaw. If the frost holds like this, we are anticipating a very pleasant afternoon to-morrow: the people from the barracks and some others are coming over, the men report the ice in capital order, and there's to be luncheon and that kind of thing. But perhaps, after all, you don't skate, Mr. Joyce?"

"Oh yes, indeed—and you?"

"Nothing in the world I'm so fond of, or, if I may say so, that I do so well. We wintered one year in Vienna; there was a piece of water privately enclosed called the Schwann Spiegel, where the Emperor—never mind!"

The next day was very bright and very pleasant. Whether Walter Joyce had prayed for a thaw or not, it is certain that the frost of the previous night had been very mild as compared with its immediate predecessors; the wind had shifted round to the south-west, the sun had actual warmth, and weatherwise people assumed to notice a certain dun effect of the atmosphere, and therefrom to presage snow. The notion of the skating-party about to take place had been received with immense delight at the barracks at Brocksopp, and at the various houses to which invitations had been forwarded. To exhibit themselves in becoming costume a little removed from ordinary every-day dress was in itself a delight to the younger members of society; while the elders, independently of their gratification in being brought personally into contact with the Lord-Lieutenant of the county, knew the capabilities of the Westhope cellar and kitchen, and recognised the fact that luncheon under such auspices meant something more than sandwiches and cheap sherry. The gathering was held on a large sheet of water which was a pond, but which, being situate in the Westhope domain, profited by the generally aristocratic nature of its surroundings and was called a lake, lying about half a mile from the house. A large tent had been pitched on the bank, and as of course it was impossible to have any regular sit-down luncheon, refreshments were perpetually going on, "snacks" were

indulged in between the performance of wild evolutions given out to be quadrilles, and gone through to the music of the military band, which, with very blue cheeks and very stiff fingers, was playing on the bank, and the consumption of liquids, from champagne in tumblers to curaçoa in wine-glasses, was tremendous.

The party from Westhope had driven down in a break, in which a seat had been offered to Walter Joyce by Lady Hetherington herself, who had condescended to visit the library for the express purpose. It happened, however, that the secretary was specially engaged on an important letter, which it was necessary should be despatched that day, so that he was compelled to ask to be allowed to find his own way to the lake. When he arrived, there was already a large gathering, the bank was lined with spectators, and there was a tolerably large number of skaters. Lord Hetherington, wrapped in an enormous fur coat, with a hood hanging half-way down his back, was standing looking on with a somewhat melancholy expression. It had just occurred to him that skating was a pleasant pastime, that to skate well was a thing of which a man might reasonably be proud; at the same time he realised the fact that it was a thing impossible to be done by proxy—he could not get any man to skate for him and give him the credit of it. Colonel Tapp, cleaner shaved and waxier moustached than ever, stood by his lordship. The colonel did not skate—not that he could not; in his youth he had been a proficient in the art, but he was not in his youth now, and was so strapped, and busked, and laced into his various garments, outer and inner, that he feared if by mischance he fell it might either be impossible for him to get up at all, or something might give way and cause him to be raised in a limp and unpresentable condition. Mr. Biscoe had no such qualms, and was buckling on his skates with all his characteristic impetuosity—old-fashioned skates, cumbrous with woodwork, and with curly tops, very different from the light and elegant trifles in which handsome little Mr. Boyd was

performing all sorts of figures before the countess and a group of ladies gathered together on the bank, and trying to look as if they were interested and amused.

"Charmin' scene!" said Lord Hetherington, surveying the lake in a birdlike fashion, with his head on one side. "Quite charmin'! Whenever I see ice and that kind of thing, always reminds me of some humorous adventures I once read in a book 'bout man on the ice; Pickwinkle, or some such name. 'Commonly humorous book, to be sure!" and his lordship laughed very heartily at his reminiscences.

"You mean Pickwick, my lord," said the colonel. "Ah! I hope what happened to him won't happen to any of our party, specially our fair friends who are pirouetting away there so prettily. If you recollect the ice broke and Mr. Pickwick got a ducking. How's the ice, Boyd?" to the boy who came spinning to the edge at the moment.

"First class, colonel; couldn't be in better form; it's as hard as nails and as slippery as—as old boots," said Mr. Boyd, after hesitating an instant for an appropriate simile.

"Ah! but just keep up this end, will you?" said Mr. Biscoe, looking up, his face purple with the exertion of pulling at a refractory strap. "I was past here yesterday morning and saw that at the other end the men had broken up the ice for the deer or the waterfowl, and consequently what's there is only last night's frost, binding together the floating bits of yesterday, and likely to be very rotten."

"Better have a board with 'Dangerous' or somethin' of that sort written on it and stuck up, hadn't we?" suggested Lord Hetherington, with Serpentine reminiscences.

"Scarcely time to get one prepared, my lord," replied Mr. Biscoe, with a slight smile. "Here, two of you men take a rope and lay it across the ice just below that alder tree—that'll warn 'em; and you, Boyd, tell 'em all to keep above that line. No good having any bother if one can

prevent it." And Mr. Biscoe hobbled down the bank and shot away across the lake, returning in an instant, and showing that if his skates were old-fashioned, he could keep pace with any of the young ones notwithstanding.

"Nice exercise—very," said the colonel, who was getting so cold that he was almost prepared to risk the chance of a tumble, and "have a pair on." "I do like to see a woman skating; there's something in it that's—ah!" and the old colonel kissed the tips of his fingers, partly to warm them, partly to express his admiration. "Now, who is that in the brown velvet trimmed with fur?—she seems to know all about it."

"That's my sister Caroline," said his lordship, looking through his double glass. "Yes, she skates capitally, don't she? Pretty dress, too; looks like those people in the pictures outside the polkas, don't it? Who's—— Oh, Mr. Joyce! How d'ye do, Mr. Joyce? My secretary; very decent young man, that."

The colonel merely coughed behind his buckskin glove. He did not think much of secretaries, and shared Jack Cade's opinion in regard to the professors of the arts of reading and writing. Just then Lady Caroline approached the bank.

"Colonel, are you inclined to back the service in general and your own regiment in particular? Mr. Patey and I are going to have a race. Of course he gives me a long start. Will you bet?"

"Too delighted to have the chance of losing," said the colonel with old-fashioned gallantry. "And I'll give odds, too—a dozen pairs to half-a-dozen.—Patey, sustain the credit of the corps in every particular."

"Depend on me, colonel," said Mr. Patey, a long-limbed lieutenant of untiring wind. "Mr. Boyd, take Lady Caroline to her place, and then start us."

Walter Joyce had heard none of this colloquy. He had joined Mr. Biscoe, with whom he had formed a great friendship, and was showing him how to shift from the

outer edge of an "eight," and shoot off into a "spread eagle,"—an intricate movement requiring all your attention,—when he heard a sharp crack, followed by a loud shout. Without a word they dashed off to the other end of the lake where the crowd was greatest. Joyce arrived first. What he saw was a large pool of water where ice had been; floating on it a small round velvet cap trimmed with fur. He looked hastily round. She was not there—then he knew what had occurred.

At that instant his arm was seized by Mr. Biscoe, who whispered—

"Wait, man! They're fetching the rope!"

"Stand back," he cried, "it'd be too late! Let me go!" and the next instant he was diving beneath the floating fragments of the ice.

"It was as near as a toucher," Mr. Boyd said; and he was right. When they pulled him in, Joyce's arm, which had been wound round Lady Caroline, had nearly given way, and the hand with which he had clung to the ice-edge was all bruised and bleeding. Just as they were lifted on shore he thought he saw her lips move. He bent his head, and heard one word—"Walter!"—then he fainted.

CHAPTER XVII.

BECOMING INDISPENSABLE.

"MASTER will be glad to see you, miss, in the library, if you please."

"Very good, Wilson. Is Mr. Creswell alone?"

"Mr. Radford, the agent from Brocksopp, have been with him for the last half-hour, miss; but he's on the point to go. I saw him getting on his gloves as I left the room."

"Very good; tell Mr. Creswell I will be with him at once."

The servant retired, closing the door behind her, and Marian was left alone with her mother. They were in what they had become accustomed to call "their own" sitting-room, with its bright chintz furniture and tasteful appointments, as Marian had described them in her letter to Walter. It was tolerably early morning, just after ten o'clock, and the sun lit up the garden and the grass-plot, from which the slight frost had not yet disappeared, though the snowdrops and the crocuses were already showing their heads in the flower-borders, while the ditch-banks of the neighbourhood were thick with promised crops of violets and primroses. Mrs. Ashurst, whose infirmities seemed greatly to have increased within the past six months, was sitting by the fire with her face turned towards the window, enjoying the brightness of the morning; but her back was turned to the door, and she had not caught the servant's message.

"What was that Martha said, my dear?" she asked. "My hearing's getting worse, I think. I miss almost everything that's said now."

"You had your back towards her, dear mother; and you were too pleasantly occupied looking at the bright weather outside, and thinking that we should soon be

able to get you out for a turn up and down the long walk, in the sun. Martha came to say that Mr. Creswell wanted to see me in the library."

"Again, Marian? Why, you were with him for hours —when was it?—the day before yesterday."

"Yes, mother; you're quite right. I was there, helping him with his accounts. But there was some information which had to be supplied before we could finish them. I suppose he has obtained that now, and we can go on with our work."

"You're a clever child, my dear," said the old lady, fondly stroking her daughter's shining hair.

"There's more use than cleverness in what I'm doing for Mr. Creswell, darling mother. Don't you remember how I used to make out the boarders' bills for poor papa, and the 'general running account' to be submitted half-yearly to the governors? These are larger and more intricate matters, of course, dealing as they do with the amount and sources of Mr. Creswell's income; but I think I have mastered the method of dealing with them, and Mr. Creswell, I imagine, thinks so too."

"It must be a very large income, my dear, to keep up all this place, and——"

"Large! You have no conception of it, mother. I had no conception of it, nor of how it came in, and grew, and is for ever growing, until it was before me in black and white. Original funds, speculations, mortgages, investments in this and that, in ships and wharves and breweries, in foreign railroads, and—— Ah! good heavens, it's enough to turn one's brain to think of."

And the girl pressed her forehead with her hands, and stood motionless.

"Yes, my dear," said the old lady, stretching out her hand, and drawing her daughter gently towards her. "I've thought more than once that this house with its surroundings was scarcely the best school for a young girl who had to face poverty, and battle for her livelihood. And, indeed, I'm far from thinking that, even so far as

I'm concerned, it was wise that we should originally have come here, or that we should have stayed so long. I wish you would propose about Mrs. Swainson's lodgings again, Marian, for——"

'For Heaven's sake, don't mention Mrs. Swainson's horrid lodgings again, mother. Are you tired of your visit here?"

"No, my dear, not in the least; I'm very happy, as happy as I ever expect to be again in this world; but I know there's such a thing as outstaying your welcome, and——"

"Who has been putting such ideas into your head? Not those horrible girls! They have nothing to do with the arrangements of the house, they—there, I always lose my head when I think or speak of them!"

"You do indeed, Marian; I cannot imagine how it is that you and Maude and Gertrude don't get on together. You always seem to blaze up like I don't know what, especially you and Maude! No, my dear, the young ladies have always hoped we should stay on, but that of course is impossible, and——"

"Perhaps not impossible, mother!"

"Why not, my dear? Do you think that—— Oh no, thank you! I guess what you mean; I'm an old woman, I know, but I've still my faculties left, and I can see through a millstone as well as most people of my age, and though I'm not apt to be—I forget the word, but you know what I mean—I declare once for all I won't do it!"

"Won't do what, mother? I declare I have no notion what you mean."

"Oh yes, you have, Marian. You heard what Dr. Osborne, whom I never could abide, but that's neither here nor there, suggested about my becoming Mrs. Caddy, or rather Mrs. Caddy's successor, when she went. I'm sure you, who talk of having a spirit and a proper pride, ought to see that I couldn't do that! Your poor father wouldn't rest in his grave if he knew it! You remember he never would let me do anything with the boys' clothes,

or hair-brushes, or that—always would have a wardrobe woman; and now to think of my becoming a housekeeper——"

"But, mother—there! you shall not worry yourself with that idea any more, and still we won't think just yet of Mrs. Swainson's nasty lodging! Kiss me now, and let me go! I've been keeping Mr. Creswell waiting full ten minutes."

What change had come over Marian Ashurst to cause her to speak in this way to her mother with flushed cheek, and kindling eye, and elated look? What hope was dawning over the deep of that black blank sunless future, which she had seen before her in all its miserable intensity, its unavoidable dead level gloom, when first she arrived on a visit at Woolgreaves? What was the vision which during all that period, but especially since Tom Creswell's death, had haunted her waking and sleeping, in company and in solitude, had been ever present to her thoughts, and had wrung her heart and disturbed her mental peace more keenly even than the thought of poverty, the desire for wealth? Dare she do it? She could, she had but little doubt of that, but little doubt of Mr. Creswell's daily increasing dependence on her and regard for her. There was no one else in the world now in whom he seemed to take the slightest interest. He had been deeply grieved at his son's death, laid up for weeks afterwards—one would have thought that life for him had lost all its zest and flavour; but lately, in going through his business details with Marian, he had referred to the dead lad almost calmly, and had spoken of him almost as he used to speak of him in the days when his *brusquerie* and bad style and consequent unpopularity were gall and wormwood to his father's heart. She was thoroughly and entirely essential to him. He had told her so. He had said plainly enough that with no one else, no paid hirelings, no clerk, however trustworthy or confidentially employed, could he have gone through the private accounts, which showed the sources of his revenue and its investment, and which had dropped into almost

hopeless confusion and arrear, from which they were only rescued by her quick apprehension, clear business knowledge, and indefatigable industry. He sat by in mute wonder, as she seized upon each point as it was laid before her, and stopped him in the midst of his verbose and clumsy explanation, to show how clearly she comprehended him, and how lightly she undertook the unravelment of matters which seemed to him almost hopeless in their chaotic disarrangement.

What a wonderful girl she was, Mr. Creswell thought, as he looked at her poring over the items of account as he read them out to her, and marked the sudden manner in which her cheek flushed and her bosom heaved and her eye dilated, while that ready pen never ceased in its noiseless course over the paper. How thoroughly natural to be able to throw herself so entirely into the work before her, to take evident interest in what would be to others the driest detail, mere husk and draff of soulless business! He knew nothing of Marian Ashurst, less than nothing. That dry detail and those soulless figures were to her more interesting than the finest fiction, the most soul-stirring poetry. For they meant something much better than fiction; they meant fact—wealth, position, everything. She remembered, even as she jotted down from Mr. Creswell's loose memoranda or vague recollections of sums invested here or securities lying there, or interest payable at such and such dates—she remembered how, as a child, she had read of Sinbad's visit to the Valley of Diamonds, and how, in one of the few novels she had come across in later life, she had been breathlessly interested in the account of the treasure in Monte Christo's grotto. Those delights were fictional, but the wealth recorded in her own handwriting before her own eyes was real—real, and, if she mistook not, if the golden dreams had not warped her intellect and dazzled her brain, enjoyable by her. Thoroughly enjoyable, not as a miserable dependent permitted to bask in the rays of prosperity, but as the originator of the prosperity itself, the mistress of the

fortune—the—— No wonder her cheek flushed; she felt her brain throb and her head whirl; the magnitude of the stakes, the chances of success appalled her. She had never realised them before, and, while they were beginning to dawn on her, the desperate effect of her proposed end upon one who had hitherto been loved by her she had steadfastly contrived to ignore.

If she dared to do it? Why should she not dare; what was it to dare, after all? Was she to lose her chance in life, and such a chance, simply because as a girl she had agreed to a foolish contract, which, as it seemed, it was impossible could ever be fulfilled? Was her youth to be sacrificed to a preposterous engagement, which, if it was ratified at all, could only be ratified in grim middle age, when all power of enjoying life would have fled, even if the hope of anything to enjoy were then vouchsafed her? She knew too well that people would be ready enough to bring accusations against her, but of what could they accuse her? Of selfishness? but it would not be merely for her own self-advancement that she would take advantage of the opportunity that offered for bettering her position in life. Her mother was thoroughly dependent upon her, and the past few months had made a wonderful difference in her mother's physical condition. With plenty of comfort and attention, with a command of certain luxuries and the power of remaining perfectly quiescent, knowing that there was not the smallest occasion for mental disquietude, Mrs. Ashurst's life might last for some time, but the smallest mental worry would probably be fatal. This Dr. Osborne had said, and it behoved Marian to think of her mother before any one else in the world.

And yet—and yet? Was it all to be forgotten and stamped out, that one halcyon time of her existence, that one period in which she had ceased to think of the struggle for living, and to love life for being as it was? Was that one green oasis where she had rested so pleasantly, forgetful of the annoyances past, not caring for the dangers

to come, as she lay beside the bubbling fountain of Hope, and drank of its pure waters—was that to be swallowed up in the world's simoom, and to vanish with every trace obliterated? Or was it but a mere mirage, unsubstantial and unreal? As she battled with herself she pressed her eyes tightly with her hands, and endeavoured to recall those scenes of her life. She would see her lover, modest, earnest, hopeful, delighted at his so-far success, sanguine as to that which was to come. She would remember the cheery manner in which he would meet her doubts, the calm self-reliance, never degenerating into bravado, with which he spoke of their future as perfected by his efforts. Reminiscences, looks, tones, each had their effect upon her. Then she would think of that future, even when painted as glowingly as in Walter's fervent expectation. And what was it? Genteel poverty at its best. The coming together of two hearts in a cheap lodging, with a necessity for watching the outlay of every sixpence, and a short career of starved gentility as the coming result of a long life of labour and waiting. And to give up all she had in prospect, all she had in command, she might almost say, for this—— Poor Walter, poor Walter! what would he do? All his whole life was bound up in her, in her his every thought centred. How would he—— Wait, though! She was not so sure of what she was saying. Who was this Lady Caroline Somebody of whom he wrote so strongly? Two or three times he had mentioned her in his letters. Marian recollected having smiled at Walter's first description of this great lady, who, though he tried to disguise it, had evidently been struck with him; but now she seized on the idea with quite a different object in view. Suppose she should carry out what she had in her mind, it would be expedient for her to show to the world —to such portion of the world as chose to be inquisitive or indignant about her proceedings—that all shame, so far as breaking off the original engagement was concerned, did not rest with her, that Walter himself had not kept faith with—— She broke off the thread of her thought abruptly,

she could not battle with herself, she knew how vain and ridiculous the accusation would be, how the object of it would shake it from him with scorn; but it had a certain semblance of truth and likelihood, and it would do to bring forward, in case any such defence was ever needed.

"Well, missy," said Mr. Creswell, looking up from the papers on which he was engaged, "you see I've been compelled to send for my assistant; I couldn't get on without her."

"Your assistant is only too glad to come when she finds she can be of use to you, sir. Has the pass-book come from the bank, and did you get those returns you asked for from the Wharfdale Company?"

"What a memory you have, child! I declare I had forgotten what had stopped our work the other morning. I remembered only that you would have gone on until you dropped, but for want of material. Yes, they are both here."

"I see; and the totals both approximate to the sums you mentioned. There will be no difficulty now in preparing the rough balance-sheet. Shall I begin that at once?"

"No, no, missy; that is too large an undertaking for you. I'll have that done down at the office. I'm only too thankful to you for the assistance you've rendered me in getting the items into order, and in checking matters which I could not possibly have submitted to an uninterested person, and which I'm—well, I'm afraid I must say it—too old to go into myself!"

"Since you praise me, I have a right to claim a reward, and I demand to be allowed to carry out my work to the end. I shall be proud of it, proud to think that, when next these accounts are gone through, you will be able to look at mine, and see that they do no discredit to your book-keeping pupil."

There was a slight change in Mr. Creswell's voice as he said—

"My child, I don't suppose this task will occur again

in my lifetime. It would have stood over well until my poor boy came of age, had it pleased God to spare him; but I have only done it now from a renewal of the old stock-taking habit, a desire to see how my worldly affairs stood before——"

But the voice broke, and the sentence was left unfinished.

"But surely, sir, it must be a source of pride, and of pleasure too, to you, being, as you have often pointed out to me, the architect of your own fortunes, to have this convincing proof of their stability and your success?"

"Success! my dear child; pride! pleasure! Ah, missy, a man must have lived but a small life, if towards the end of it he looks for pride and pleasure in the amount of his balance at his bankers', or for his success in having heaped up more money than his fellows!"

"No; not in that entirely, of course; but in having carried out the main idea of his life, and——"

"The main idea of my life! that was in existence but a very little while, missy! The main idea of my life was to make my poor Jenny a good husband, and afterwards —when the boy was born—to leave him a good and honoured name. Both those hopes are extingusihed now, Marian. The first went years ago, the last—you know when. And this," pointing with his pen to the bank-book in front of him—"this has no power to fill their place."

Both were silent for some minutes; then Marian said, "You have shown me how silly I was to speak as I spoke just now."

"My child, you spoke as a child; as one who has never known—who, please God, never will know—the vanity of such resources as those in time of trouble."

"I spoke as one who has known sorrow, Mr. Creswell, but who also has known, and who never can too gratefully acknowledge, the kindness of friends who were willing and able to help her. I think, I am sure, it will be a source of satisfaction to you to remember that your

position enabled you to soften, very much to soften, the severity of the blow which so recently fell upon my mother and myself."

"There, indeed, you show me some use in what you are pleased to call my 'position.' It is long since I have experienced such gratification as in being enabled to show some neighbourly civility to the wife and daughter of my old friend. Even if you had been personally very different from what you are, I should have been pleased to do it in remembrance of him; but your mother is the gentlest and the most amiable creature in the world, while as for you——"

He paused for an instant, and her heart beat high. Only for an instant; she resumed her normal respiration as he laid his hand softly on her head, and said, "If I had had a daughter, child, I could have wished her not one whit different from you."

She was quite calm again, as she said, "I am so pleased to hear you say that, sir; for as you know, there are few to give me that affection which you truly describe as being the only thing worth living for. And I am so glad that I have been able to be of use to you, and to have shown you, in a very poor way indeed, how grateful I am to you for all your kindness to us before we leave you."

"Leave me, Marian? What are you talking of, child?"

"The fact," she replied, with a sad smile—"the dire hated fact. We must go, sooner or later; and it is the best for me—for us, I mean—that now it should be sooner. We have remained here longer than we intended, many weeks longer, owing to—to circumstances; and we have been, oh, so happy! Now we must go, and it will be better for us to look the fact in the face, and settle down in Mrs. Swainson's lodgings, and begin our new life."

Mr. Creswell's face had grown very white, and his hands were plucking nervously at his chin. Suddenly a light seemed to break in upon him, and he said, "You won't go until you've finished the balance-sheet? Promise me that."

"No," said Marian, looking him straight in the face, "I'll finish that—I promise you."

"Very good. Now leave me, my dear. This unexpected news has rather upset me. I must be alone for a little. Good-bye! God bless you!" And he bent, and for the first time in his life kissed her forehead. "You—you won't forget your promise?"

"You may depend on me," said Marian as she left the room.

Outside the door, in the bay-window where she had held her colloquy with Dr. Osborne on the night of Tom's death, were Maude and Gertrude, seated on the ottoman, one at work, the other reading. Neither of them spoke as Marian passed; but she thought she saw a significant look pass between them, and as she descended the stairs she heard them whispering, and caught Maude's words: "I shouldn't wonder if poor Tom was right about her, after all."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RUBICON.

Of course Walter Joyce was a hero of heroes for days after the ice-accident. Lady Hetherington for the time being threw off every semblance of insolence and patronage, complimented him in the highest terms on his bravery and presence of mind, and assured him that he had established a claim upon their gratitude which they could never repay. Lord Hetherington was visibly affected, and had great difficulty in thanking his sister's preserver in anything like a coherent manner, lapsing into wild outbursts of "Don't you know!" and explaining that it would be impossible for him to express the feelings and that kind of thing under which he laboured. The gentlemen from the

barracks, who had hitherto regarded "old Hetherington's secretary-fellow" as a person utterly unworthy of notice, began to think that they had been mistaken. Young Patey sent a short account of the incident to the sporting paper of which he was an esteemed correspondent, and made a mental note to ask Joyce to play in a football-match which was about to come off, and of which he had the direction. Colonel Tapp not merely assisted in carrying Joyce's senseless body to the tent, whereby he became much damped with drippings, which he nobly ignored, but sent off one of the men for the surgeon of the depôt and evinced an amount of interest and attention very rare in the self-sustained old warrior. Mr. Biscoe said very little indeed; he had been the only person close to the ridge of the broken ice, and he might have heard what Lady Caroline whispered in Joyce's ear, and he might have formed his own opinion of how matters stood from what he saw of them then. But he said nothing. His lips wreathed into a peculiar smile two or three times in the course of the evening, but nothing escaped them; and as he was smoking his after-dinner cigar in his study, he chuckled in a manner which was not to be accounted for by the perusal of anything in the *Guardian*, which he was supposed to be reading, more especially as he dropped his eyeglass, lay down the paper, and rubbed his hands with intense enjoyment. Just before he dropped asleep, he said—

"It's a thousand pities Joyce is not in orders! He'd have had Chudleigh Rectory when old Whiting goes, as safe as possible; old Whiting can't live long, and Chudleigh must be worth twelve hundred a year."

"Mr. Joyce have Chudleigh? Why should he have had Chudleigh? What makes you think that, Robert?" asked the partner of his joys, from the neighbouring pillow.

"Ah! what indeed?" was all the answer Robert made, and was snoring in an instant.

What did Lady Caroline herself say? Very little. She had a slight access of fever for three days, and kept her

room for a week. The first time Joyce saw her was in the library, where he was at work. She came across the room with outstretched hand, and in a few very simple words told him she owed her life to him, and had come to tell him so, and to thank him for it. She was looking wonderfully beautiful; Joyce thought he had never seen her to such advantage. The usual pallor of her cheeks was relieved by a deep rose flush, her violet eyes were more than ever luminous, and she had departed from her usual style of coiffure, her chestnut hair being taken off her forehead, and gathered up in a huge plait at the back of her head.

"You recollect my first mention to you of the intention of having that dreadful ice-party, Mr. Joyce?" said Lady Caroline, after the first speeches of acknowledgment.

"Perfectly; it was in this room, almost where we are sitting now."

"Don't you remember—I hope you don't, and if you don't, it's silly in me to remind you, though I can't help it—that I had been quizzing you about the way in which you remained devoted to your writing, and assured you that we should only attempt to tear you away from it, and to get you to join us on one other occasion before we went to town, and that was to this skating affair? It would have been but a poor look-out for one of the party if you hadn't been there."

"You're giving me much greater credit than I deserve, Lady Caroline; and indeed during all the past week I've felt that I've been placed in a false position in the hero-worship I've received. It certainly happened that I got to the lake before Mr. Biscoe, and I was in quicker than he, but that was because I was a little younger, and had longer limbs. But what I've done to be made so much of, I really don't know!"

"You've saved my life, Mr. Joyce—and won my eternal gratitude!"

And again she stretched out her hand.

"The last is ample reward for the first, Lady Caroline! No other recognition is necessary!"

And he took her hand, but he merely held it for an instant, and bowed over it and let it go. Did not even press it, never thought of attempting to raise it to his lips. Lady Caroline withdrew it quietly with a half laugh. He was the coldest, most insensate, impassible man in the world, she thought; clever, and with a great amount of odd indescribable fascination, but a perfect stone.

He was not. He was a simple, single-minded man, unaccustomed to the ways of flirtation, and utterly uncomprehending any of the mysteries of the craft. He had felt naturally proud of the notice which Lady Caroline had taken of him, had written of it to Marian, attributing it, as he honestly thought it was due, to Lady Caroline's superior education and greater love of books attracting her to him for companionship. He was by no means an observant man, as but few students are, but he had noticed, as he thought, a certain amount of freedom in manners generally at Westhope, which was very different from anything he had previously seen. He ascribed it to the different grade of society, and took but little notice of it. He must, however, have been more than blind not to have seen that in Lady Caroline's conduct towards him at the time of the accident there was something more than this; that in that whispered word, "Walter!" and the tone in which it was whispered, there was an unmistakable admission of a sentiment which he had hitherto chosen to ignore, and which he determined to ignore still.

Walter Joyce was but human, and it would be absurd to deny that his vanity was flattered. He had a sufficient feeling for Lady Caroline, based on gratitude, and nurtured by general liking, to experience a certain compunction for her, placed as she must inevitably find herself by his mode of treatment of her; but regarding that mode of treatment he had never an instant's doubt. He had been brought up in far too strict a school of honour ever to palter with himself for a moment, much less with any one else. His heart was in Marian Ashurst's keeping, his

liege love, and in not one single pulsation should it be false to her. All this he had thought out before the interview with Lady Caroline, and his conduct then was exactly as he had prescribed to himself it should be. He took no credit to himself for his coldness and reserve, nor indeed did he deserve any, for he felt as calmly and coldly as he acted. There was but one person in the world with power to make his heart leap, his pulses fill, to rouse his energy with a look, to cloud his hopes with a word. Why was she silent, then? She could not know how critical the time might have been, she should never know it, but he felt that he wanted her advice, advice on the general questions of his life, and he determined to write to her in a way that should elicit it.

Thus he wrote:

"Westhope, Friday.

"My dearest Marian,

"I am still without any news of you, although this is the third letter I have written since I received your last. I know that you must have been very much and very specially engaged. I know, as you will have gathered from my last hasty few lines, that poor Tom Creswell is dead, and I feel that you must have been called upon to your utmost to play the part of comforter, and to bring your keen sympathies and busy brains into active use to restore something like a semblance of ordinary comfort to that disordered and desolate household. That you are the mainstay of the family in their trouble, as of course few would be, I happen to know. Did I tell you how? Mr. Gould, who is Lord Hetherington's principal business agent, showed me a letter he had had from you, written in Mr. Creswell's behalf, about the impossibility of the poor old gentleman's carrying out some sale of land, about which he had been previously negotiating, under the existing melancholy circumstances. It seemed so strange to see the handwriting, so familiar, and so dear to me, addressed to another; treating of business topics, and yet conveying information, which was surely interest-

ing to me, but of which I was yet ignorant. However, you had your duty to do to the people who had been so kind to you, and who had done much more than their duty by you during the time of your trials, and I, who know you so well, have no doubt that you have done it, not merely in the letter but in the spirit.

"I suppose that by this time the first shock of grief will have passed away, and that the household at Woolgreaves will be assuming something like its normal state, and I presume, therefore, that you and Mrs. Ashurst will be soon thinking of bringing your visit to an end, even if by this time you have not already entered upon the lodgings which you told me you had in view. I have no doubt that if this be so now, or whenever it comes, both you and Mrs. Ashurst will much miss the material comfort which you have enjoyed during the last few months. It is impossible that it should be otherwise, but you, at all events, have long had a clear idea of your future, and so long as you are with her I do not fear Mrs. Ashurst's becoming a prey to despair. The woman who battled so bravely by your dear father's side is not likely to give way now that the heat of the contest is over, and a retreat, humble indeed, but sufficient for existence, is provided for her. I should almost rather fear the effect of the change upon you. I should very much fear it if I laid much stress upon the opinions with which the last letter I received from you was rife, opinions breathing the very essence of worldly philosophy, but scarcely such as one would expect to find in a young girl's letter to her lover. However, I do not lay much stress on these opinions; I know that it is the fashion just now to affect a cynicism which is not really felt, and to ascribe to one's self faults and follies which have no substantial basis. I am sure that you must have become infected with this idea, and that you wrote under its influence, for nothing could be more opposite than your new doctrine to the teachings of your youth and the example of your parents.

"It is time, however, my dear Marian, that we should

each shake ourselves free from any little affectations or delusions which have hitherto possessed us, and make up our minds to look our position resolutely in the face. I say both of us, because I am perfectly conscious of having permitted myself to start in life as the victim of a delusion of a very different kind from yours. I was as sanguine as you were depressed, and when, on the day we parted, you had a notion that there was an end to all happiness to be enjoyed mutually by us, I had a feeling that I was taking my first step towards the premiership, or the governorship of the Bank of England. I pray God that your idea was as baseless as mine. I *know* that my position can never be a great or a wealthy one, that all I ever get I must earn by my handwork, and I am perfectly content, so long as I have your approval of my steps, and you yourself as my reward.

"But we must not dream any more, Marian, either of us, and you, especially, must not suffer yourself again, for whatever reason, to be tempted out of your regular sphere. All your attention henceforth must be given to the joint interests which must be paramount in your heart. Life progresses, dear. How the months have slipped away since we parted! and we must not let youth and health and all that is best pass out of it, and leave us still pursuing a flying shadow, and waiting for better days till we shall come together. Not now, or ever, will I take any step as regards my future without your counsel and consent, considering as I do that that future is yours as much as mine. But I want to be assured of your hearty interest and desire for co-operation in my affairs, Marian. I feel sure I have it; I know it is almost absurd in me to doubt its existence, but I have been so long away from you, and you have been so long without writing to me, that I long to read the assurance in your own hand. What would I not give—if I had anything, poor wretch! —to hear it from your lips! but that is impossible just yet.

"Now, what we have to think of is definite and

pressing. I must give a decisive answer within a week, and you will see the bearing and importance of that decisive answer on our future. I believe I could stay on here for any time I chose. The big history-book, though I work hard at it every day, is as yet only in its commencement, and I am told that when the family goes to town next week I am to accompany them, and to devote my time in London to purely secretarial work, correcting my lord in his speeches, writing his letters, etc., while the history of the Wests is to remain in abeyance until the autumn. Everybody is particularly kind to me, and had I never 'lifted my eyes to my master's daughter,' like the 'prentice of old, I might have been very happy here. But I have other hopes in view, and a married private secretary would be impossible. It's lucky, then, that there is another opening—yes, Marian, a new chance, which, I think, promises, splendidly promises, to realise all we have hoped—all I have hoped for, all you can have justly anticipated—speedy union for us both, under decent competence when united. Listen.

"My old friend Byrne, of whom you heard so much when I was in London, wrote to me some time since, telling me that my name had been suggested as the correspondent then required for a London newspaper in Berlin. I thought but little of it at the moment, for though, thanks to old Dr. Breitmann, in the dear old days at Helmingham, I knew myself to be a tolerable German scholar, I doubted whether I had sufficient 'nous' and experience of the world for the post. I wrote this to Byrne, and I think he was rather of my opinion; but the man with whom the recommendation rested, and who knew me from having met me constantly during those weeks I was living with Byrne, and knew also some of my qualifications, as it was through him I obtained those odd jobs on the press, declared that I would be the very man for their purpose, and has so pressed the matter that I have agreed to let them have their answer with my decision in a week's time. For that decision I come to you. They

offer me a year's engagement to start with, with the certainty of renewal if I fulfil their expectations, and four hundred a year, with the prospect of a rise. Four hundred a year, Marian, and in a country where money goes much further than in England! Four hundred a year, and we united for ever, and dear Mrs. Ashurst—for, of course, she will be with us—with a son as well as a daughter to tend and care for her! Now you see why I made the commencement of my letter rather sombre and gloomy, in order to heighten the brilliancy of the finish. Now you see why I talked about the lodgings and the privations—because there is no need to submit to any of them.

"Marian darling, you must answer this instantly! I have no doubt as to the tone of your reply, but I can do nothing until I get it, and time presses. Don't be afraid of any ill-feeling on the part of Lord Hetherington or any one here. I have been able to render them something of a service—I will tell you about it when we meet—and they will all be delighted at anything which brings good fortune to me. And now good-bye! Think how little time now before I shall hold you in my arms! Write at once. God bless you, now and ever.

"Your WALTER."

Sunday morning at Woolgreaves; bright splendid sunshine, the frost all gone, and Nature, renovated by her six months' sleep, asserting herself in green bud and lovely almond blossom, and fresh sprouting herbage on every side. Far away on the horizon lay Brocksopp, the week-day smoke cloud, which no wind dispelled, yet hovering like a heavy pall over its sabbath stillness; but the intervening landscape was fresh and fine, and calculated to inspire peaceful thoughts and hopeful aspirations in all who looked on it. Such thoughts and such aspirations the contemplation of the scene inspired in old Mrs. Ashurst, who sat propped up by pillows in a large easy-chair in her sitting-room, gazing out of the window, look-

ing at nothing, but enjoying everything with the tranquil serenity of old age. For several years past there had not been much life in the old lady, and there was very little now; her vital powers, never very strong, had been decaying slowly but surely, and Dr. Osborne knew that the time was not far distant when the widow of his old friend would be called away to rejoin the husband she had so dearly loved in the Silent Land.

"A case of gradual decay, my dear sir," said the little doctor, who had been up all night, bringing the heir of a neighbouring squire into the world, and who had stopped at Woolgreaves on his way home, and asked for breakfast —a meal which he was then taking in company with his host; "what we call the *vis vitæ* quietly giving way."

"And by what I gather from you, doctor, I fear our old friend will not be much longer with us?"

"It is impossible to say, but I should think not. Sad thing for the daughter; she's very much attached to her mother, and will feel the loss very much. Wonderful girl that, sir!"

"Miss Ashurst? She is, indeed!" said Mr. Creswell abstractedly.

"Such a clever head, such individuality, such dominant will! Let her make up her mind to a thing and you may consider it done! Charming girl, too; simple, unaffected, affectionate. Dear me! I think I can see her now, in frilled trousers, bowling a hoop round the schoolhouse garden, and poor Ashurst pointing her out to me through the window! Poor Ashurst! dear me!"

Dr. Osborne pulled out a green silk pocket-handkerchief ornamented with orange spots, buried his face in it, and blew a loud and long note of defiance to the feelings which were very nearly making themselves manifest. When he reappeared to public gaze, Maude and Gertrude had entered the room, and the conversation took a different turn. The young ladies thought it a lovely morning, so fresh and nice, and they hoped they would have no more of that horrid winter, which they detested. Yes, they had

seen dear Mrs. Ashurst, and she seemed much the same, if anything a little brighter than last night, but then she always was brighter in the mornings. Miss Ashurst had gone for a turn round the garden, her mother had said. And did uncle remember that they must go to Helmingham Church that morning? Oh! Dr. Osborne didn't know that Hooton Church was going to be repaired, and that there would not be service there for three or four Sundays. The snow had come through on to the organ, and when they went to repair the place they found that the roof was all rotten, and so they would have to have a new roof. And it was a pity, one of the young ladies thought, that while they were about it they didn't have a new clergyman instead of that deaf old Mr. Coulson, who mumbled so you couldn't hear him. And then Dr. Osborne told them they would be pleased at Helmingham Church, for they had a new organist, Mr. Hall, and he had organised a new choir, in which Miss Gill's soprano and Mr. Drake's bass were heard to the greatest effect. Time to start, was it not? Uncle must not forget the distance they had to walk. Yes, Maude would drive with Dr. Osborne with pleasure. She liked that dear old pony so much. She would be ready in an instant.

Marian went with the rest of the party to church, and sat with them immediately opposite the head-master's seat, where she had sat for so many years, and which was directly in front of the big school pew. What memories came over her as she looked across the aisle! Her eyes rested on the manly figure and the M.B. waistcoat of Mr. Benthall, who sat in the place of honour; but after an instant he seemed to disappear as in a dissolving view, and there came in his place a bowed and shrunken elderly man, with small white hands nestling under his ample cuffs, all his clothes seemingly too large for him, big lustrous eyes, pale complexion, and iron-gray hair. No other change in the whole church, save in that pew. The lame man who acted as a kind of verger still stumped up the pulpit-stairs, and arranged the cushion, greatly to the horror of the

preacher of the day, Mr. Trollope, who, being a little man, could hardly be seen in the deep pulpit, and whose soft little voice could scarcely be heard out of the mass of wood and cotton velvet in which he was steeped to the ears. The butcher, who was also churchwarden and a leading member of the congregation, still applied to himself all the self-accusatory passages in the responses in the Psalms, and gave them out, looking round at his fellow-parishioners, in a tone of voice which seemed to say, "See what an infernal scoundrel I am, and how I delight in letting you know it!" The boys in the school were in the same places—many of them were the same boys; and the bigger ones, who had been in love with Marian when she lived among them, nudged each other as she came in, and then became scarlet from their clean collars to the roots of their freshly pomatumed hair. Fresh faces nowhere but there. Change in no life but hers. Yes, as her eye rested on Mr. Creswell's solemn suit of black she remembered that life had changed also for him. And somehow, she could scarcely tell how, she felt comforted by the thought.

They left the church when the service was ended, but it was some time before they were able to start on their way home. Mr. Creswell came so seldom into Helmingham, that many of his old acquaintances saw him there for the first time since his wife's death, and came to offer their long-deferred condolence, and to chat over matters of local gossip. Marian, too, was always a welcome sight to the Helmingham people, and the women gathered round her and asked her about her mother's health, and of their prospects, and when they were going to leave Woolgreaves; to all of which questions Marian replied with perfect self-possession and without giving her querists any real information.

At last they set out homeward. Maude and Gertrude started off at a rapid rate, and were soon out of sight. Mr. Creswell and Marian walked quietly on together, talking on various subjects. Mr. Creswell was the principal speaker, Marian merely answering or commenting on

what he said, and, contrary to her usual custom, never originating a subject. Her companion looked at her curiously two or three times during their walk; her eyes were downcast, her forehead knit, and there was a generally troubled expression in her face. At length, when they had nearly reached their destination, and had turned from the high-road into the Woolgreaves grounds through a private gate, he said—

"You are strangely silent to-day, missy. Has anything happened to vex you?"

"To vex me? Nothing in the world. And it had not even struck me that I was particularly silent. It seems to me as though we had been talking ever since we left Helmingham."

"We? I, you mean. You have been almost monosyllabic in your replies."

"Have I? That was scarcely polite when you take the trouble to talk to me, my kind friend. The fact is that I have been in a kind of day-dream, I believe."

"About the future, Marian?" Mr. Creswell said this so earnestly that the girl looked up into his face. His eyes fell before hers as she said, steadily—

"No; about the past. The sight of the school pew, and of another person there in papa's place, called up all sorts of recollections, which I was revolving instead of listening to you. Oh no!" she added, after a pause; "I love dreaming of the past, because, though it has here and there its dim hues and its one great and ineffaceable shadow of papa's loss, it was, on the whole, a happy time. But the future——" and she stopped suddenly, and shuddered.

"You have no pleasant anticipations of the future, Marian?" asked Mr. Creswell in a lower tone than he had hitherto spoken in.

"Can you ask me—you who know me and know how we are circumstanced? I declare I—— There! I'm always apt to forget myself when this subject is broached, and I speak out without thinking how uncalled for and ridiculous it is. Shall we walk on?"

"Not for an instant. I wanted to say a few words to you. I was talking to Dr. Osborne this morning about Mrs. Ashurst."

"About mamma?"

"The doctor said what cannot fail to have struck you, Marian, who are so devotedly attached to your mother and so constantly in attendance on her—that a great change has recently come over her, and that she is much more feeble and more helpless than she used to be. You have noticed this?"

"I have indeed. Dr. Osborne is perfectly right. Mamma is very much changed."

"It is obviously necessary that she should not feel the loss of any little comfort to which she may have been accustomed. It is most essential that her mind should not be disturbed by any harassing fears as to what might become of you after she was gone."

Marian was silent. Her face was deadly pale, and her eyes were downcast.

"There is only one way of securing our first object," continued Mr. Creswell, "and that is by your continuing in this house."

"That is impossible, Mr. Creswell. I have already explained to you the reason."

"Not impossible in one way, Marian—a way too that will secure the other object we have in view—your mother's peace of mind about you. Marian, will you remain in this house as its mistress—as my wife?"

It had come at last, the golden chance! She knew that he understood she had accepted him, and that was all. Mr. Creswell went on rapturously, telling her how his love had grown as he had watched her beauty, her charming intelligence, her discretion, and her worth; how he had been afraid she might think he was too old for her; how she should prove the warmth of his affection and the depth of his gratitude. All this he said, but she heard none of it. Her brain was running on her having at last achieved the position and the wealth so long a source of

bitter misery and despair to her. The end was gained; now life would indeed be something to her.

When they reached the house, Mr. Creswell wanted to go with her at once to Mrs. Ashurst's room; but Marian begged to be alone for a few moments, and parted with him at the door. As she passed through the hall she saw a letter lying on the table addressed to her. It was the letter from Walter Joyce.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARIAN'S REPLY.

MARIAN held the letter in her hand for a moment, irresolute whether to open it and read it at once, or to defer its perusal until another opportunity, when her mind might be less perturbed, and the feeling of conscious guilt then uppermost in her soul might have become quieted and soothed down. She was fully alive to the knowledge that she had behaved with the blackest treachery to Walter Joyce, had dealt him the severest stab, the deadliest blow, of which she was capable, had—for the time at least—completely blackened his future prospects; and yet, although he had done nothing to deserve this base treatment—on the contrary, had been for ever loyal and devoted to her under the most adverse circumstances—her feeling for him was not one of pity, of regret, or even of contempt, but of downright hatred. She knew that she had been seriously to blame in neglecting all correspondence with her lover of late, and she imagined that the letter, which she still held unopened in her hand, was doubtless one of remonstrance or complaint. He had no right now to address her after such fashion, or indeed after any fashion whatever. This last thought struck

her for an instant with a touch of tenderness, but she quickly put it aside as she thrust the letter into the bosom of her dress, and made her way to her mother's room.

She found Mrs. Ashurst seated in the bay-window, at the little round table, on which lay her large-printed Bible, her bottle of smelling-salts, and her spectacle-case. Mrs. Ashurst had always been a small-framed, delicate-featured woman, but in these last few months she seemed to have shrunk away almost to nothing. The light steel frame of her spectacles looked disproportionately heavy on her thin nose, and her sunk pallid face, with the complexion of that dead white colour so often seen in old women, was almost lost in the plaits and frills of her neat cap. Though the day was fine and bright outside, the old lady evidently felt the cold; she wore a thick twilled woollen shawl thrown over her shoulders, and her cosy armchair was in the full view of the fire. She looked up as Marian entered, and, when she recognised the visitor, gave a little smile of welcome, took off her spectacles, closed her book, and put up her face for her daughter's kiss.

"What a long time you have been away, dear!" she said, in the softest little voice. "I thought you were never coming back! I was wondering what had become of you!"

"Did you think Dr. Osborne had run off with me in the four-wheeler, mother?" said Marian, smiling. "The knight and his means of flight are about equally romantic! We're later than usual, dear, because Hooton Church is closed for repairs, and we've been to Helmingham!"

"Yes, I know that; but Maude and Gertrude went to Helmingham too, didn't they? And I'm sure I've heard their voices about the house this half-hour!"

"There were all sorts of Helmingham people to speak to in the churchyard after service—Mrs. Simmons, who is growing quite gray; and old Mrs. Peak, whose feet are very bad again, so bad that she can hardly get about now, poor soul; and young Freeman and young Ball, who have

taken Mr. Smyth's corn-chandlery business at Brocksopp, and go over there next week; and Sam Baker, who is very much grown, and of whom Mr. Benthall speaks very highly. They all asked very kindly after you, mother!"

"I'm very much obliged to them, my dear. I shan't trouble them long, and——"

"Now, don't you remember your promise never to talk in that way again?"

"Well, my dear, I won't if you don't like it. As for myself—however, no matter! And did you walk back with Mr. Creswell?"

"Yes, mother. Maude and Gertrude hurried on, and Mr. Creswell and I came leisurely after."

"You'll become quite old-fashioned if you're so much with Mr. Creswell, Marian. Though why I say 'become,' I'm sure I don't know. You've always been old-fashioned from a child up."

"And am likely to remain so, dear, to all appearances!" said Marian, with a soft smile, bending down and kissing her mother's forehead. "Have you taken your medicine? No! then let me give it to you!" She went to a small cabinet, and brought out a tumbler and a spoon.

"I'm very glad you thought of the medicine, Marian," said the old lady; "not that it does me the least good, let Dr. Osborne say what he may, but because your fetching those things from that place reminded me of something I wanted to say to you. I've been all this morning—ever since I finished reading the lessons—I've been going through the furniture in that parlour of Mrs. Swainson's in my mind, and I'm perfectly certain there's nothing, not even a common cupboard, to lock up anything!"

"Isn't there, mother?" said Marian wearily.

"Isn't there? No, indeed there is nothing, dear! Though you don't seem to think much about it, it's a very serious thing. Of course, one would keep the tea and sugar in the caddy, but there are many little odds and ends that ought to be locked up, and—— Are you listening to me, Marian?"

"Yes, mother," she said, but her looks belied her words. She was leaning against the mantelpiece, her head resting on her hand, and her thoughts were evidently far away.

"I wonder you had not noticed that, Marian, when we went over the lodgings," pursued Mrs. Ashurst. "You're generally such a one to notice these kind of things, and I've been used to depend upon you, so that I think nothing about them. What shall we do about that? I suppose Mrs. Swainson would not be inclined to buy a cabinet—a second-hand one would do perfectly——"

"I don't think we need go into the question. We shall never go to Mrs. Swainson's lodgings!"

"No? What shall we do, then?"

"Remain here!"

"Well, my dear," said the old lady, "if you change your plans so often, how am I possibly to know where we're going, or what we're going to do? Not that I want to be consulted, but I really might as well be a chair or a table for the manner in which I am treated. I thought you said, not more than a fortnight ago, that it was impossible we could stop here any longer!"

"So I did, mother; but circumstances have changed since then. This morning, as we walked from church, Mr. Creswell asked me to become his wife."

"His wife! Mr. Creswell! you to—and you accepted him?"

"I did!"

The old lady fell back in her chair, her eyes closed, her hands fluttering nervously before her. Marian ran to her mother and knelt by her side, but Mrs. Ashurst revived almost immediately—revived sufficiently to place her hand round her daughter's neck and to whisper in her ear, "For my sake?"

"I don't understand you, dearest mother."

"For my sake? You've done this for my sake! that I may be comfortable and happy for the rest of my life, that I may have these things, luxuries"—pointing with

her hand round the room. "You've sacrificed yourself! It must not be; listen, Marian—it must not be!"

"Darling mother, you're all wrong, indeed you are—you're quite mistaken."

"Marian, it must not be! I'm a weakly woman, I know, but what answer should I make to your dear father when I meet him again—soon now, very soon, please God!—if I permitted this thing! What would he say if he learned that I was selfish enough to permit you to sacrifice yourself, you whom he so worshipped, to become the wife of an old man, in order that I might profit by it? What would be think of Mr. Creswell, who pretended to be his friend, and who would——"

"Mother, dearest mother, you must not speak against Mr. Creswell, please! Recollect he is to be my husband!"

"Very well, my dear," said the old lady quietly; "I'll ask you one question, and after that you'll never hear me open my lips on the matter. Do you love Mr. Creswell?"

"Yes, mother."

"Better than any other man living?"

"Ye-yes, mother." She hesitated for an instant, but the answer came round and firm at last.

"You swear that to me?"

"Yes, mother."

"That's enough, my dear! I shall be ready to face your father now." Mrs. Ashurst then removed her arm from her daughter's neck and lay back in her chair. After a minute or two she told Marian she had heard the luncheon-gong sound, and that she would prefer being left alone for a little. When Marian came up to kiss her before leaving the room, the little old lady's white face became suffused with a glow of colour, and the voice in which she prayed God to bless her child, and keep her happy throughout her life, was broken with emotion, and weaker and fainter than ever.

When she was alone Mrs. Ashurst pondered long and

earnestly over what she had just heard. Of course, the question of Marian's future—and to her parents as well as herself the future of every girl means her marriage—had been often thought of by her mother. She and her dead husband had talked of it in the summer evenings after supper and before retiring to rest, the only time which the school-work left for James Ashurst to devote to himself, and even then he was generally rather fatigued with past, or preoccupied with growing work. It was very general, the talk between them, and principally carried on by Mrs. Ashurst; she had wondered when Marian would marry, and whom; she had gone through the list of eligible young men in the neighbourhood, and had speculated on their incomes and their chances of being thrown with Marian in such little company as they kept. She had wondered how they at home would be able to get on without her; whether she herself would be able to undertake the domestic superintendence, as she had done in the old days before Marian was of an age to be useful; whether Marian would not settle somewhere near, where she might still take an interest in her old work, and many other odd and profitless speculations, to which the dominie would give an affirmative or negative grunt or comment, wondering all the while how he was to meet that acceptance which he had given to Barlow, and which became due on the twenty-seventh, or whether his old college chum Smith, now a flourishing physician in Cheltenham, would lend him the fifty pounds for which he had made so earnest an appeal. But all this seemed years ago to Mrs. Ashurst as she thought of it. For many months before her husband's death the subject had not been mooted between them; the cold calm external impassibility, and the firm determination of Marian's character, seemed to her mother to mark her for one of those women destined by nature to be single, and therefore somewhat fitted for the condition. A weak woman herself, and with scarcely any perception of character, believing that nearly all women were made in the same mould and after the

same type, Mrs. Ashurst could not understand the existence of the volcano under the placid surface. Only gushing, giggling, blushing girls fulfilled her idea of loving women, or women lovable by men. Marian was so "odd" and "strange," so determined, so strong-minded, that she never seemed to think of love-making, nor indeed, her mother thought, had she been ever so much that way disposed, would she have had any time for it.

And now Marian was going to be married! Years rolled away, and the old lady saw herself in the same condition, but how differently circumstanced! Her James was young and strong and handsome. How splendid he looked in his flannel boating-dress, when he came to spend a hurried holiday at her father's river-side cottage! How all the people in the church admired him on their wedding-day! It was impossible that Marian could love this man, who was quite old enough to be her father,—love him, that is, in the proper way, in the way that a husband should be loved. She could look up to him, and respect and reverence him, and so on; but that was not the way in which she had loved her James. She had not the least respect for him, but used to laugh at him for his awkwardness, and great strong clumsy ways, never knowing what to do with his long legs and his great feet, and used to call him "a great goose;" she recollected that, and the recollection brought the colour to her face, and made her smile in spite of herself. Marian could never call Mr. Creswell "a great goose," could never think of him so familiarly, no matter how long they might be married. What could have brought it about? She had very good eyes, she thought, and yet she had never suspected Mr. Creswell of any partiality for Marian; any, at least, beyond that which a man in his position and of his age might be expected to feel for a bright intelligent girl with whom he was thrown into frequent contact. And as for Marian, it was the last thing she should have expected of her. If she were to think of marriage, which Mrs. Ashurst never contemplated, she would not have suffered

herself to be thrown away on a man so much older than herself; she would have looked for some one whom she could love. No; it was what had first struck her, and the more she thought about it the more convinced she grew. Marian had sacrificed herself on the shrine of filial duty; she had accepted the position of Mr. Creswell's wife in order that her mother might be able to continue in the house where all possible comforts and luxuries were at her command. It was a good motive, a noble affectionate resolve, but it would never turn out well, she was sure of that. There had been a baronet once under James's tuition—what was his name? Attride, Sir Joseph Attride, a young man of rather weak intellect—who had been sent by his friends to be what James called "coached for something," and who had a very large fortune; why did not Marian take him, or Mr. Lawrence, the miller and churchwarden, who was very rich, and took so much snuff? Either of them would have been much more suited to her than Mr. Creswell. And so the old lady sat—chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy, but always coming back to her proposition that Marian had sacrificed herself for her mother's sake—throughout the afternoon.

When Marian left her mother she did not take the hint about the luncheon-gong—the pretence under which Mrs. Ashurst had asked to be left to herself. She knew that if her absence from the table were remarked, it would be attributed to the fact of her being engaged in attendance on her mother. She knew further that Mr. Creswell would not expect to see her just then, and she calculated on having two or three hours to herself free from all interruption. So she went straight to her own room, turned the key in the lock, sat herself down in a low chair opposite the fire—fires are kept constantly alive in that north-midland county, where coals are cheap, and the clay soil cold and damp—took Walter Joyce's letter from the bosom of her dress, opened, and began to read it. It was a task-work which she had to go through, and she nerved herself as for a task-work. Her face was cold and

composed, her lower jaw set and rigid. As she read on the rigidity of her muscles seemed to increase. She uttered no sound, but read carefully every word. A slight expression of scorn crossed her face for a moment at Walter's insisting on the necessity of their good faith towards each other, but the next instant it vanished, and the set rigidity returned—returned but to be equally fleeting, to be swept away in a storm of weeping, in a hurricane of tears, in a wild outburst of genuine womanly feeling, showing itself in heaving bosom, in tear-blistered face, in passionate rocking to and fro, in frenzied claspings of the hands and tossing of the head, and in low moaning cries of, "Oh, my love! my love!"

It was the perusal of the end of Joyce's letter that had brought Marian Ashurst into this state; it was the realisation of the joy which, in his utter devotion to her, must have filled his heart as he was enabled to offer to share what he imagined great prosperity with her, that wrung her conscience and showed her treatment of him in its worst light. It was of her alone that he thought when this offer was made to him. He spoke of it simply as a means to an end—that end their marriage and the comfort of her mother, whose burden he also proposed to undertake. He said nothing of what hard work, what hitherto unaccustomed responsibility, it would entail upon him; he thought but of the peace of mind, the freedom from worry, the happiness which he imagined it would bring to her. How noble he was! how selfless and single-minded! This was a man to live and die for and with indeed! Was it too late? Should she go bravely and tell Mr. Creswell all? He was sensible and kind-hearted, would see the position, and appreciate her motives, though the blow would be a heavy one for him. He would let her retract her consent, he would—— Impossible! It might have been possible if she had read the letter before she had told her mother of Mr. Creswell's proposal, but now impossible. Even to her mother she could not lay bare the secrets of her heart, disclose the slavery in which she

was held by that one ruling passion under whose control she had broken her own plighted word, and run the risk of breaking one of the truest and noblest hearts that ever beat.

No; she could not do that. She was growing calmer now; her tears had ceased to flow, and she was walking about the room, thinking the matter out. No; even suppose—well, this proposal had not been made: it would have been impossible to move Mrs. Ashurst in her then state to Berlin, and she could not have gone without her; so that Walter must either have gone alone, or the marriage must have been deferred. And then the income—four hundred a year. It was very good, no doubt, in comparison to what they had been existing on since papa's death—very superior to anything they could have expected, quite a sufficiency for one or two young people to begin life upon; but for three, and the third one an invalid, in a foreign country? No; it was quite impossible. Marian looked round the room as she said these words; her eyes lighted on the bright furniture, the pretty prints that adorned the walls, the elegant ornaments and nick-nacks scattered about, the hundred evidences of wealth and taste which were henceforth to be at her entire command, and repeated, "Quite impossible!" more decisively than before. By this time she was quite herself again, had removed every trace of her recent discomposure, and had made up her mind definitively as to her future. Only one thing troubled her,—what should be her immediate treatment of Walter Joyce? Should she ignore the receipt of his letter, leave it unanswered, take the chance of his understanding from her silence that all was over between them? Or should she write to him, telling him exactly what had happened—putting it, of course, in the least objectionable way for herself? Or should she temporise, giving her mother's delicate state of health and impossibility of removal abroad as the ground of her declining to be married at once, as he required, and beginning by various hints, which she thought she could manage cleverly enough, to

pave the way for the announcement, to be delayed as long as practicable, that their engagement was over, and that she was going to marry some one else? At first she was strongly inclined to act upon the last of these three motives, thinking that it would be easier to screen herself, or at all events to bear the brunt of Joyce's anger when he was abroad. But after a little consideration, a better spirit came over her. She had to do what was a bad thing at best; she would do it in the least offensive manner possible,—she would write to him.

She sat down at the little ink-bespattered, old-fashioned writing-desk which she had had for so many years, on which she had written so often to her lover, and which contained a little packet of his letters, breathing of hope and trust and deep-rooted affection in every line, and wrote—

"Woolgreaves, Sunday.

"MY DEAR WALTER,

"I have something to tell you which you must know at once. I can approach the subject in no round-about fashion, because I know it will cause you a great shock, and it is better for you to know it at once. I do not pretend to any doubt about the pain and grief which I am sure it will cause you. I will tell you my reasons for the step I am about to take when I tell you what I have already done. Walter, I have broken my engagement with you. I have promised to marry Mr. Creswell.

"I write this to you at once, almost directly after he proposed to me, and I have accepted him. Does it seem harsh and coarse in me to announce this to you so immediately? Believe me, the announcement is made from far different motives. I could not bear to be deceiving you. You will sneer at this, and say I have been deceiving you all along. I swear I have not. You will think that the very silence for which you reproached me in the letter just received has been owing to my dislike to tell you of the change in affairs. I swear it has not. I had no idea until

this morning that Mr. Creswell liked me in any especial way; certainly none that he would ever ask me to become his wife.

"When he asked me, I had not had your letter. If I had, it would have made no difference in the answer I made to Mr. Creswell, but it deepens the pain with which I now write to you, showing me as it does, to an extent which I did not before quite realise, the store which you set by what is now lost to us for ever. I do not say this in excuse of myself or my deeds; I have no excuse to make. I have tried, and tried hard, to live in the position of life in which I have been placed. I have struggled with poverty, and tried to face the future—which would have been worse than poverty, penury, misery, want perhaps—with calmness. I have failed. I cannot help it, it is my nature to love money and all that money brings, to love comforts and luxuries, to shrink from privation. Had I gone straight from my father's deathbed to your house as your wife, I might perhaps have battled on; but we came here, and —I cannot go back. You will be far happier without me when your first shock is over. I should have been an impossible wife for a poor man, I know I should—complaining, peevish, irritable; ever repining at my poverty, ever envying the wealth of others. You are better without me, Walter, you are indeed! Our ways of life will be very different, and we shall never come across each other in any probability. If we should, I hope we shall meet as friends. I am sure it will not be very long before you recognise the wisdom of the course I am now taking, and are grateful to me for having taken it. You are full of talent, which you will now doubtless turn to good account, and of worthy aspirations, which you will find some one to sympathise with, and share the upward career which I am sure is before you. I thought I could have done as much at one time, but I know now that I could not, and I should be only acting basely and wickedly towards you, though you will not think it more basely and wickedly than I am now acting with you, if I had gone on pretending that I could,

and had burdened you for life with a soured and discontented woman. I have no more to say.

"MARIAN."

"You do not repent of what you said to me this morning, Marian?" said Mr. Creswell in a whisper, as he took her in to dinner.

"On the contrary," she replied in the same tone, "I am too happy to have been able to gratify you by saying it."

"What has happened with Miss A.?" whispered Gertrude to Maude, at the same time; "I don't like the look in her eyes."

And certainly they did look triumphant, almost insolently so, when their glance fell on the girls.

CHAPTER XX.

DURING THE INTERVAL.

SATURDAY morning, the day after that on which Joyce had sent off the eventful letter to Marian. Twelve o'clock, and no appearance as yet of Lady Caroline Mansergh, who had sent word that she had a slight headache, and would take her breakfast in her room. Lady Hetherington hated people having breakfast in their rooms: it did not, of course, inconvenience her in the least; she herself was never particularly lively in the morning, and spoke very little, and disliked being spoken to, so that it was not the loss of companionship that she regretted; it was merely what people called a "fad" of hers, that the household generally should assemble at the breakfast-table, and she was annoyed when anything occured to prevent it.

Her ladyship was generally out of temper that morning, several things having conspired to disturb her equanimity. They were about to move the establish-

ment to London, which was always a sore trial for her at the best of times; but now that they were going up before Easter, it was specially hard to bear. She had told Lord Hetherington, as she pathetically narrated both orally and by letter to all her friends, that it was useless their going to Hetherington House at that time of the year, when they would find no one in town but members' wives who had come up for the session, and the wretched people who live there all their lives; there wouldn't be a soul they knew, and the draughts at Hetherington House were perfectly awful; and yet Lord Hetherington would go She could not imagine what had come to him. The last morning's post had brought her a letter from her milliner, asking for money; and even the greatest ladies sometimes not merely dislike being asked for money, but have difficulty in finding it; and the countess's stock of ready cash happened to be very low at that moment. And the new housekeeper who had come from Lady Rundell Glasse's, and who was so highly recommended, had turned out a complete failure, and must be got rid of before they go to town; and old Mrs. Mason, the town housekeeper, must be telegraphed to to look out for some one else; and altogether her ladyship was thoroughly upset, and, wanting some one to vent her ill-humour on, and having lost her judgment as well as her temper, thought she would find that some one in Lady Caroline. So, when twelve o'clock arrived, and her sister-in-law had not put in an appearance, the countess went to her room, entered upon her knock, and found Lady Caroline buried in a huge chair in front of the fire reading a book, while her maid was combing her hair. There was scarcely anything which Lady Caroline liked better than having her hair combed—not dressed, that she hated—but quietly combed and brushed alternately. She almost purred under the sensation, like a cat whose fur is smoothed the right way; it was pleasant, it was refreshing, it soothed her, and put her on good terms with the world; so that when she looked up and saw Lady Hetherington, to whom she was

not very partial, she received her with a smile, and expressed her delight at the visit.

"It is really immensely good of you to come and see me, Margaret, especially when I know you're not fond of taking trouble in a general way," she said, putting her book on to her lap and looking up languidly.

"They told me you were ill, or I don't know that I should have come," retorted Lady Hetherington with some asperity.

"Ah, that was quite right of them; I told them to say that.—You can go, Phillips"—to the maid—"I'll ring when I want you.—I don't suppose there's any harm in sending mendacious messages by the servants; do you? It would be far more demoralising to them if one were to tell the truth and say one was lazy, and that kind of thing, because it would provoke their contempt instead of their pity, and fill them with horrible revolutionary ideas that there was no reason why they shouldn't be lazy as well as we, and all sorts of dreadful things."

"If I had thought it was mere laziness that kept you to your room this morning, Caroline, I think my dislike 'of taking trouble in a general way' would have influenced me in this particular instance, and saved you the bore of my interrupting you."

"That's where you're so ungenerous, Margaret. Not the smallest bore in the world; the stupidity of this book, and Phillips's action with the hair-brush combined, were sending me off to sleep, and you interfered at an opportune moment to rescue me. How is West this morning?"

"Very much as he was last night. Intent on distinguishing himself on this—what do you call it?—irrigation scheme."

"Oh dear, still harping on those channels and pipes, and all the rest of it! Poor Mr. Joyce! there is plenty of work in store for him, poor fellow."

"Dreadful, will it not be, for that charming young man to be compelled to work to earn his wages?" said Lady Hetherington with a sneer.

Lady Caroline looked up, half astonished, half defiant. "Salary, not wages, Margaret," she said, after a moment's pause.

"Salary, then," said her ladyship shortly; "it's all the same thing."

"No, dear, it isn't. Salary isn't wages; just as the pin-money which West allows you isn't hire. You see the difference, dear?"

"I see that you're making a perfect fool of yourself with regard to this man!" exclaimed Lady Hetherington, thoroughly roused.

"What man?" asked Lady Caroline in all apparent simplicity.

"What man? Why, this Mr. Joyce! And I think, Caroline, that if you choose to forget your own position, you ought to think of us, and have some little regard for decency; at all events, so long as you're staying in our house!"

"All right, dear," said Lady Caroline with perfect coolness. "I'm sorry that my conduct gives you offence, but the remedy is easy. I'll tell West how you feel about it at luncheon, and I'll leave your house before dinner!"

A home-thrust, as Lady Caroline well knew. The only time that Lord Hetherington during his life had managed to pluck up a spirit was on the occasion of some real or fancied slight offered by his wife to his sister. Tail-lashings and roarings, and a display of fangs are expected from the tiger, if, as the poet finely puts it, "it is his nature to." But when the mild and inoffensive sheep paws the ground, and makes ready for an onslaught with his head, it is the more terrible because it is so unexpected. Lord Hetherington's assertion of his dignity and his rights on the one occasion in question was so tremendous that her ladyship never forgot it, and she was extremely unwilling to go through such another scene. So her manner was considerably modified, and her voice considerably lowered in tone as she said—

"No, but really, Caroline, you provoke me into saying

things which you know I don't mean. You are so thoughtless and headstrong—— "

"I never was cooler or calmer in my life! You complain of my conduct in your house. It would be utterly beneath me to defend that conduct, it requires no defence, so I take the only alternative left, and quit your house."

"No; but, Caroline, can't you see—— "

"I can see this, Lady Hetherington, and I shall mention it once for all. You have never treated that gentleman, Mr. Joyce, as he ought to be treated. He is a gentleman, in mind and thought and education, and he comes here and does for poor dear stupid West what West is totally unable to do himself, and yet is most anxious to have the credit of. The position which Mr. Joyce holds is a most delicate one, one which he fills most delicately, but one which any man with a less acute sense of honour and right might use to his own advantage, and to bring ridicule on his employer. Don't fancy I'm hard on dear old West in saying this; if he's your husband he's my brother, and you can't be more jealous of his name than I am. But it's best to be plainspoken about the matter now, it may save some serious difficulties hereafter. And how do you treat this gentleman? Until I spoke to you some months since you ignored his presence; although he was domesticated in your house you scarcely knew his personal appearance. Since then you bow, and give him an occasional word, but you're not half so polite to him as you are to the quadrille-bandsman when he is in much request, or to the Bond Street librarian when stalls for some particular performance are scarce. I am different; I am sick to death of 'us' and our 'set,' and our insipid *fade* ways, and our frightful conventionality and awful dulness! Our men are even more odious than our women, and that's saying a good deal; their conversation varies between insolence and inanity, and as they dare not talk the first to me, they're compelled to fall back on the second. When I meet this gentleman, I find him perfectly well-

bred, perfectly at his ease, with a modest assurance which is totally different from the billiard-table swagger of the men of the day; perfectly respectful, full of talk on interesting topics, never for an instant pressing himself unduly forward, or forgetting that he is what he is—a gentleman! I find a charm in his society; I acknowledge it; I have never sought to disguise it. The fact that he saved my life at the hazard of his own does not tend to depreciate him in my eyes. And then, because I like him and have the honesty to say so, I am bid to 'think of' my relations, and 'have regard for decency!' A little too much, upon my word!"

People used to admire Lady Caroline's flashing eyes, but her sister-in-law had never seen them flash so brilliantly before, nor had her voice, even when singing its best, ever rung so keenly clear. For once in her life, Lady Hetherington was completely put down and extinguished; she muttered something about "not having meant anything," as she made her way to the door, and immediately afterwards she disappeared.

"That woman is quite too rude!" said Lady Caroline to herself, ringing the bell as soon as the door closed behind her sister-in-law. "If she thinks to try her tempers on me, she will find herself horribly mistaken. One sufferer is quite enough in a family, and poor West must have the entire monopoly of my lady's airs!—Now, Phillips, please to go on brushing my hair!"

Meantime, the cause of all this commotion and outbreak between these two ladies, Walter Joyce, utterly unconscious of the excitement he was creating, was pursuing the even tenor of his way as calmly as the novel circumstances of his position would admit. Of course, with the chance of an entire change in his life hanging over him—a change involving marriage, residence in a foreign country, and an occupation which was almost entirely strange to him—it was not possible for him to apply his mind unreservedly to the work before him. Marian's face would keep floating before him instead of the

lovely countenance of Eleanor de Sackville, erst maid of honour to Queen Elizabeth, who had this in common with Marmion's friend, Lady Heron, that fame "whispered light tales" of her. Instead of Westhope, as it was in the old days, with its fosse, drawbridge, portcullis, ramparts, and all the mediævalisms which it is in duty bound to have, Walter's fancy was endeavouring to realise to itself the modern city of Berlin, on the river Spree, while his brain was busied in conjecturing the nature of his forthcoming duties, and in wondering whether he possessed the requisite ability for executing them. Yes! he could get through them, and not merely that, but do them well, do anything well with Marian by his side. Brightened in every possible way by the prospect before him, better even in health and certainly in spirits, he looked back with wonder on his past few months' career; he could not understand how he had been so calm, so unexpectant, so unimpassioned. He could not understand how the only real hopes and fears of his life, those with which Marian was connected, had fallen into a kind of quiescent state, which he had borne with and accepted. He could not understand that now, when the hopes had been aroused and sent springing within him, and the fears had been banished, at least for a while. For a while?—for ever! The mere existence of any fear was an injustice to Marian. She had been true and steadfast, and good and loving. She had proved it nobly enough. The one weakness which formed part of her character, an inability to contend with poverty—a venial failing enough, Walter Joyce thought, especially in a girl who must have known, more particularly in one notable instance, the sad results of the want of means—would never now be tried. There would be no need for her to struggle, no necessity for pinching and screwing. Accustomed since his childhood to live on the poorest pittance, Joyce looked at the salary now offered to him as real wealth, position-giving, and commanding all comforts, if not luxuries. The thought of this, and the knowledge that she would be able to take her mother with

her to share her new home, would give Marian the greatest pleasure. He pictured her in that new home, bright, sunny, and cheerful; the look of care and anxiety, the two deep brow-lines which her face had worn during the last year of their residence at Helmingham quite obliterated; the old, cheerful, ringing tone restored to her voice, and the earnest, steadfast, loving gaze in her quiet eyes; and the thought almost unmanned him. He pulled out his watch-chain, took from it the locket containing Marian's portrait (but a very poor specimen of photography, taken by an "arteeste" who had visited Helmingham in a green van on wheels, and who both orally and in his printed bills laid immense stress on the fact that not merely the portrait, but a frame and hook to hang it up by, were in certain cases "given in"), and kissed it tenderly. "In a very little time now, my darling!" he murmured—"in a very little time we shall be happy."

Pondering on his coming meeting with Marian actively suggested the thought of the severance of existing ties, and the parting with the people with whom he was then domesticated. He had been very happy, he thought, all things considered. He was in a bright pleasant mood, and thus indisposed to think harshly of anything, even of Lady Hetherington's occasional fits of temper or insolence. Certainly Lady Hetherington had always treated him with perfect courtesy, and since the great day of the ice-accident had evinced towards him a marked partiality. As for Lady Caroline—he did not know why his cheek should flush as he thought of her, he felt it flush, but he did not know why—as for Lady Caroline, she had been a true friend; nothing could exceed the kindness which she had shown him from the day of his arrival among the family, and he should always think of her with interest and regard. It was clearly his duty to tell Lord Hetherington of the offer he had received, and of the chance of his leaving his secretaryship. Or, as Lord Hetherington was scarcely a man of business, and as Lady Hetherington cared but little about such matters, and might not be pleased at having

them thrust under her notice, it would be better to mention it to Lady Caroline. She would be most interested, and, he thought, with the flush again rising in his face, most annoyed at the news; though he felt sure that it was plainly a rise in life for him, and his proper course to pursue, and would eventually give her pleasure. He would not wait for the receipt of Marian's reply—there was no need for that, his bounding heart told him—but he would take the first opportunity that offered of telling Lady Caroline how matters stood, and asking her advice as to how he should mention the fact to her brother. That opportunity came speedily. As Joyce was sitting in the library, his desk an island in a sea of deeds and papers and pedigrees, memorials of bygone Wests, his pen idly resting in his hand, his eyes looking steadfastly at nothing, and his brains busy with the future, the door opened, and Lady Caroline entered. Joyce looked up, and for the third time within an hour the flush mounted to his face.

"I'm very sorry to disturb you, Mr. Joyce," said her ladyship, "but I have two or three notes for to-night's post, and the house is so upset with this coming departure for London, that there's not a quiet place where one can write a line but here. I'll sit down at West's writing-table and be as mute as a mouse."

"There's no occasion for silence, Lady Caroline," replied Joyce. "I am not specially busy just now, and indeed I was going to ask the favour of a little conversation with you."

"Conversation with me?" And Lady Caroline's voice, unconsciously perhaps, became a little harder, her manner a little less familiar as she spoke.

"With you, if you please. I have some news to tell, and some advice to ask."

"I'm sure I shall be delighted to hear the first and to give the second—that is, if advice from me would be of any use to you, which I very much doubt." Neither voice nor manner were in the least relaxed, and Lady Caroline's face was very pale, and rather hard and stern. "How-

ever," she added, after a moment's pause, finding he did not speak, and in a different tone, "under present circumstances I ought to feel very little compunction in disturbing you, for you go to town on Wednesday, and you know you prophesied for yourself the strictest seclusion when once you arrived at Hetherington House."

"That is the very matter on which I wanted to speak to you, Lady Caroline!"

"Indeed!" said Lady Caroline, with a rather disappointed air.

"I don't suppose that I shall ever set foot inside Hetherington House."

"Why, you don't mean to say you have gone back to that originally preposterous notion of remaining here after we have all gone? Do you remember the man who was going to play Othello and blacked himself all over, Mr. Joyce? There is such a thing as overdoing one's devotion to one's duty; or rather, what one imagines one's duty."

"No, I certainly do not intend to remain at Westhope."

"You are pleased to speak in enigmas to-day, Mr. Joyce, and as I am horridly stupid at such things, and never guessed one of them in my life, I must be content to wait until you are further pleased to explain." There was an impertinence about her ladyship sometimes in look and tone which became her immensely, and was extraordinarily provoking.

"Seriously, then, Lady Caroline, I am thinking of leaving my present occupation——"

"Of leaving us—I mean Lord Hetherington?" interrupted Lady Caroline.

"Yes. Not that I am not, as I ought to be, thoroughly grateful to his lordship and to everybody of his family for their kindness and consideration to me, but the fact is that I have received an offer of employment which, perhaps, will suit me better, and——"

"You would be very foolish not to avail yourself of it,

then, Mr. Joyce," again interrupted Lady Caroline, the chilling tone coming back to her voice and the stern look to her face.

"Will you kindly hear me out?" said Joyce. "I am not exaggerating when I say that I am so grateful for all the kindness which I have received in this house, that nothing would tempt me to leave it that did not give me the chance of being enabled to gratify the one wish of my life. The offer which has been made to me will, I think, do this. You have been good enough, Lady Caroline, to admit me to sufficient intimacy to talk of my private affairs, and when I mention the one wish of my life, you will know that I mean my marriage with Miss Ashurst."

"Certainly," said Lady Caroline, full of attention; "and the proposition which is under your consideration—or, rather, which I suppose you have accepted—will enable you to carry out this plan?"

"It will. There shall be no disguise with you. I am offered the post of Berlin correspondent to a London newspaper. The salary would not be considered large by you, or any one of your—you know what I mean," he said, in answer to an impatient movement of her head. "But it is sufficient to enable me to offer Marian the comforts which she ought to have, and to receive her mother to live with us."

"That will be very nice—very nice indeed," said Lady Caroline reflectively. "I'm sure I congratulate you very heartily, Mr. Joyce—very heartily. I think you said, when that man—what's his name?—Lord Hetherington's agent—said something about a boy whom you knew being killed—I think you said you had not heard from Miss Ashurst for some time."

"Yes; I did say so."

"Have you heard since?"

"No, I have not. But I can perfectly understand her silence, and you would if you knew her. Marian is one of those persons who, on occasions like this—of illness and death, I mean—are the mainstay of the place wherever

they may happen to be, and have to take the whole burden of management on to their own shoulders."

"Of course—certainly—no doubt," said Lady Caroline. "And she has not written since the boy's death?"

"No, not since."

"It must have been a sad blow for the old father to bear. I don't know why I call him old, though. What age is he?"

"Mr. Creswell? About fifty-five, I should think."

"Ah, poor man! poor man!" said Lady Caroline, with much greater expression of pity for Mr. Creswell than when she first heard of Tom's death. "You have written to Miss Ashurst, informing her of this proposition, you say, Mr. Joyce?"

"Yes, I wrote directly the offer assumed a tangible form."

"And as yet you have not had her reply?"

"No; there has not been time. I only wrote yesterday; she will not get the letter until to-morrow."

"True, a two days' post from here to—where she is staying. Then you will look for her answer on Wednesday. Are you entirely depending on Miss Ashurst's reply?"

"I scarcely understand you, Lady Caroline."

"I mean, you are waiting until you hear from Miss Ashurst before you send your acceptance of this offer? Exactly so! But—suppose Miss Ashurst thought it unadvisable for her to leave this place where she is staying just now——"

"That is an impossible supposition."

"Well, then, put it that her mother's health—which you told me was ailing—was such as to prevent her from undertaking so long and serious a journey, and that she thought it her duty to remain by her mother——"

"'Forsaking all other, and cleaving only unto him,'" quoted Joyce with gravity.

"Yes, yes, my dear Mr. Joyce, very proper; but not the way of the world nowadays; besides, I'm sure you

would not be selfish enough to have the old lady left behind amongst strangers. However, grant it hypothetically—would you still take up this appointment?"

"I cannot possibly say," replied Joyce, after a moment's pause. "The idea is quite new to me. I have never given it consideration."

"I think I should, under any circumstances, if I were you," said Lady Caroline earnestly, and looking hard at him. "You have talent, energy, and patience, the three great requisites for success, and you are, or I am very much mistaken, intended for a life of action. I do not advise you to continue in the course now opening to you. Even if you start for it, it should be made but a stepping-stone to a higher and a nobler career."

"And that is——"

"Politics! Plunged in them you forget all smaller things, forget the petty disappointments and discouragements which we all have equally to contend with, whatever may be our lot in life, and wonder that such trivial matters ever caused you annoyance! Wedded to them, you want no other tie; ambition takes the place of love, is a thousand times more absorbing, and in most cases offers a far more satisfactory reward. You seem to me eminently suited for such a career, and if you were to take my advice, you will seek an opportunity for embracing it."

"You would not have me throw away the substance for the shadow? You forget that the chance of my life is now before me!"

"I am by no means so certain that it is the chance of your life, Mr. Joyce! I am by no means certain that it is for the best that this offer has been made to you, or that the result will prove as you imagine. But in any case you should think seriously of entering on a political career. Your constant cry has been on a matter on which we have always quarrelled, and a reference to which on your part very nearly sent me off just now—you will harp upon the difference of social position. Now, distinction in

politics levels all ranks. The two leaders of political parties in the present day, who really have *pas* and precedence over the highest in the land, who are the dispensers of patronage, and the cynosures of the world, are men sprung from the people. There is no height to which the successful politician may not attain."

"Perhaps not," said Joyce. "But I confess I am entirely devoid of ambition!"

"You think so now, but you will think differently some day, perhaps. It is a wonderfully useful substitute."

"Would you advise me to speak to Lord Hetherington about my intentions?"

"I think not just yet, seeing that you scarcely know what your intentions are. I think I would wait until after Wednesday. Good-bye, Mr. Joyce; I have gossiped away all my spare time, and my letters must wait till to-morrow. You will not fail to let me know when you receive your reply. I shall be most anxious to know."

"This country beauty is playing fast and loose with him," said Lady Caroline to herself, as the door closed behind her. "She is angling for a bigger fish, and he is so innocent, or so much in love—the same thing—as not to perceive it. Poor fellow! it will be an awful blow for him, but it will come, I feel certain."

CHAPTER XXI.

SUCCESS ACHIEVED.

THE step which Mr. Creswell took in asking Marian Ashurst to become his wife was not taken without due care and consideration. As, during a lifetime which had now exceeded half a century, he had been accustomed to ponder over, sift, and weigh the most minor details of even trivial schemes before carrying them out, it was not likely that he would give less attention to a plan, on the successful or unsuccessful result of which his whole hope of future earthly happiness or misery might be based. The plan presented itself to him squarely and from a business-like point of view, like all other plans which he entertained, and had two aspects—as to how it would affect himself, and how it would affect others. He took it under the first aspect and thought it out carefully. His was a loving nature, always desiring something to cherish and cling to. In bygone years he had had his wife, whom he had worshipped with all the warmth of his loving nature. She had been the sharer of his struggles, but it had not been permitted to her to take part in his success; doubtless for the best—for Mr. Creswell, like all men who have been thoroughly successful, and with whom everything has gone straight, had perfect trust and reliance on the dispensations of Providence—she had been removed before his position was acquired. But she had left behind her a son for whom that position was destined, for whom his father slaved for years, adding to his wealth and establishing his name, all the while hoping against hope that the boy might one day learn how to use the former and how to maintain the latter. As the lad grew up, and year by year showed his real nature more and more, so the hope grew fainter and fainter in the father's heart, until it was finally extinguished by Tom's death.

And then he had no hope left in the world, or rather he would have had none had it not been for Marian. It seemed as though matters had been providentially arranged, Mr. Creswell thought. The dependent state of Marian and her mother, his power of assisting them, their being domiciled under his roof, which had given him such opportunity of studying Marian's character, and had so entirely reversed his original opinion of her, the assistance and support she had afforded him during that sad period of poor Tom's death,—all seemed predestined and prearranged. He knew her now. It was not like taking a girl with whom his acquaintance had been slight, or even one whom he might have thought he knew intimately, but whom he had only seen on her society-behaviour, or in such guise as she would naturally affect before any one whom she knew to be noticing her with an object. He had seen Marian Ashurst under all circumstances, and in all places. Under the strongest and hardest trials he had always seen her come out brightest and best, and he had had full opportunity of observing the sterling worth of her character. Was the end of all his life of toil and strife to be an unloved and unloving old age? Was the position which he had acquired to benefit no one but himself, and to die out with him? Was the wealth which he had amassed to be filtered away into dirty channels, or left for the benefit of charities? If these questions were to be answered in the negative, where could he find such a helpmate as Marian, where could he dream of looking for such another? His conduct could scarcely be characterised as selfish, he thought, if after the life of work and anxiety which he had passed, he tried to render its latter portion peaceful and happy; and that, he felt, was only to be done by his marriage with Marian.

So much for himself; but how would it affect others? Marian, first? Mr. Creswell was so true and so honourable a man that even in a case like the present, where the interest of his future was at stake, he would not have used an argument in the firm basis of which he did not

himself believe. In pleading his cause to Marian, he had somewhat enlarged upon the responsibility laid on her in regard to her mother—responsibility which, he argued, would be considerably lightened, if not entirely removed, by her acceptance of the position which he offered her. He believed this firmly, setting it down as an undoubted gain to Marian, who would also have position, wealth, a home, and a protector. What on the other side—what, as they said in business, per contra—what would she lose? He hoped, nothing. To many girls, to most girls, a husband old enough to be their father would have been in the highest degree objectionable; but Marian was so different to any girls he had ever seen. She was so staid, so decorous, so old-fashioned; her life had been one of such quietude and earnestness; she had always been associated with people so much older than herself. And then she had never had any love-affair! Mr. Creswell thanked Heaven for that. He could not fancy anything worse than playing the part of Auld Robin Gray in the ballad, and being received and accepted for the sake of his money, and, more than that, causing the rejection of a poorer suitor. That would be too dreadful! No. Marian had not been thrown in the way of that kind of thing; her father had neither entertained company nor taken her into society, and there was no one in the village, Mr. Creswell thought with a grave smile, who would have ventured to uplift his eyes towards her. He should not expect from her any romantic worship, any girlish devotion, but, at all events, she would come to him heart-whole, without any remains of previous attachments or bygone passions.

Who else would be affected by this marriage? His nieces. At least, so the world would think and say, but he should take care that the world was wrong. On the contrary, if anybody rather benefited by the step he was about to take, it should be those girls; principally because they were the persons who would be selected for the world's pity, and also because, he could not tell why, he

rather disliked them. It was very wrong, he knew, and he had often reasoned with himself, and struggled hard against it, but the result was always the same. They were no companions for him. He had tried very hard to make himself feel interested in them, but, beyond his natural kinsman interest and compassion for their forlorn state of orphanage, without effect. He had examined himself as to the cause of this want of interest, and had explained to himself that they were "frivolous;" by which he meant that they had no notions of business, of money, of responsibility, of the various items which make up the serious side of life. All those qualities which made up the charms of Marian Ashurst were wanting in these girls. In reality they were not in the least frivolous; they were far better educated and informed than most young ladies of their class, and one of them, Maude, had superior natural gifts. But they were not after their uncle's bent, and he could not make them so. That, however, was the exact reason why a man with such a keen sense of honour as Mr. Creswell should treat them with even extra consideration, and should be more than ever cautious that no such proceeding as his marriage should injure them in any possible way. He thought it was due to the girls, as well as advisable for many reasons, that they should be made acquainted with the forthcoming change as speedily as possible; and he took an opportunity of saying so to Marian on the Sunday evening. Marian quite agreed with him. She had never been enthusiastic on the subject of the girls, and she did not pretend to be now.

"It would only be right that they should know it at once," she said. "I had rather, if you please, that you should tell them. It will come from you better than from me. I suppose I shall get on very well with them."

"Get on very well with them!" repeated Mr. Creswell. "With the girls? Why, of course you will, dearest. What reason could there be why you should not get on with them?"

"Oh, none in the least—of course not! It was a silly remark of mine."

Mr. Creswell knew that she never made silly remarks; one of his avowed boasts about her was, that she never spoke without thinking, and always spoke at the right time. He felt a little uncomfortable, therefore, and dropped the subject, saying, "I will tell them, then, to-morrow morning. Did you speak to Mrs. Ashurst?"

"I did!"

"And she——?"

"And she is almost as happy as her daughter at the thought! Is that sufficient?"

"God bless her!" said Mr. Creswell. "Her comfort shall be our first care! Ah, Marian, you are an angel!" And Marian thought it mattered very little how the young ladies might receive the announcement of their uncle's intended marriage, so long as their uncle held that last expressed opinion.

The next morning, while the young ladies were at their music practice, they received a message that their uncle wished to see them. It was not meant to be a formal message, but it certainly smacked somewhat of formality. Hitherto, whenever their uncle wanted them, he had been in the habit of either coming to their room, or of calling them to him. Maude looked astonished at the solemnity of the phrase "wishes to see you" as the servant delivered it, while Gertrude raised her eyebrows at her sister, and audibly wondered what it meant.

They found their uncle seated in his library, the desk before him as usual heaped with papers and accounts, and plenty of Miss Ashurst's handwriting, so horribly neat and so painfully legible, as Gertrude described it, to be seen everywhere. Mr. Creswell rose as they entered, and received them with all his usual kindness; Maude thought his manner was a little flurried and his face a little pale, but she could not gather from anything she saw the reason of their summons. Gertrude had made up her mind that somebody, she did not know who, had proposed for Maude;

but then she could not see why she was required to be present at the announcement.

There was rather an uncomfortable hitch in the proceedings at first, Mr. Creswell obviously finding it difficult to touch upon the topic which he had to treat, and the girls having no topic to touch upon. At length, Maude broke the silence by saying, "You sent for us, uncle. You wished to see us."

"Yes, my dears—yes, girls, I wanted to see you, and I asked the servant to beg you to step here, as I had something special that I wanted to say to you, for you know, my dear children, that since you came to live with me, I have always treated you as if you were my daughters—at least, I hope I have; it has been my wish to do so."

"You always have done so, uncle!" said Maude, decisively.

"Always, uncle!" echoed Gertrude, who was best as chorus.

"That's right, my dears. I'm glad you've found it so, as I intended it. So long as I live you will find that you will be treated in the same way, and I have made such provision for you in my will as I would have made for my own daughters, if it had pleased God to give me any. Having told you this, it's right that I should tell you of something which is going to happen in this house, though it won't make any difference in your position, nor any difference to you at all that I know of, but yet it's right you should be made acquainted with it. I'm—I'm going to be married!"

There was a pause for an instant, and then it was Gertrude spoke.

"To be married!" she said. "You going to be married!—Oh, uncle, I know to whom! I'm sure I can guess!"

"Guess, then, my dear," said Mr. Creswell.

"To dear old Mrs. Ashurst, isn't it?" cried Gertrude. "I'm sure it is! She is the very kindest, sweetest old thing! and if she only had better health—— I'm right, uncle, am I not?—it is Mrs. Ashurst?"

"No, my dear," said Mr. Creswell, with hesitating voice and glowing cheeks—"no, my dear, it's not Mrs. Ashurst!"

"Ah, then, it's some one you have met away from Woolgreaves, away from the neighbourhood, some one we don't know!"

"No, indeed!" said Mr. Creswell, "it is some one you know very well, and I hope love very much. It is Marian —Miss Ashurst."

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Gertrude.

"I wish you all happiness, dear uncle," said Maude, rising from her seat, crossing to her uncle, and bending down to kiss him as he sat.

"So do I, dear uncle," said Gertrude, following her sister.

"Thank you, my dears," said Mr. Creswell; "thank you very much. I said before that nothing should make any difference in your position here, nor in my intentions for the future—nor will it. Besides, it isn't as if it were a stranger—you've known Marian so long——"

"Oh yes, we've known Miss Ashurst for some time!" said Maude, with emphasis.

"Exactly!" said Mr. Creswell. "As I say, it isn't as if it were a stranger. Marian has been domiciled with us now for some time, and there is no reason why, so far as you and she are concerned, things should not go on exactly as they have done! At least, I know this to be her wish and mine," he added, after a short pause.

"Whatever is your wish, uncle, I'm sure Gertrude and I will be delighted to fulfil——"

"Delighted!" interposed Gertrude.

"And I don't think Miss Ashurst will find us give her any trouble."

"Miss Ashurst! Why not speak of her as Marian, my dear?" said Mr. Creswell.

"She has always been Miss Ashurst to me hitherto, and you know I'm not going to marry her, uncle!" said Maude, almost brusquely.

"What do you think of Miss A. now?" said Gertrude, when the girls were back in their room. "I used to laugh about her being superior! But she has shown herself superior to us with a vengeance! Fancy having her for an aunt, and having to ask her permission to do this and that, and go here and there! Oh, my! Why don't you speak, Maude? why don't you say something about all this?"

"Because I can't trust myself to speak," said Maude hurriedly. "Because I'm afraid of blurting out something that were better left unsaid."

"Oh, then, you're not so pleased at the connection! I'm sure by the way in which you wished your uncle happiness, one would have thought that the dearest wish of your heart had been realised. What do you think of Miss A.'s conduct, I mean as regards this matter?"

"Just what I think of it, and have always thought of it as regards every other matter, that it is selfish, base, and deceitful. That woman came here with a predetermined plan of marrying uncle, and chance has helped her to carry it into effect even more quickly than she anticipated. Tom saw that; he told us so, if you recollect. Poor Tom! he was a dull, unpleasant lad, but he was wonderfully shrewd, and he saw through this woman's tactics in a minute, and determined to spoil them. He would have done so, had he lived, and now, I've no doubt that the very fact of his death has been the means of hurrying uncle into taking this step!"

"Do you think Miss A. cares for uncle, Maude?"

"Cares for him—what do you mean?"

"Well, of course, I don't mean to be awfully fond, and all that sort of thing, like lovers, you know, and all that! What do you think she—well, she's fond of him?"

"Of *him?* No! she's fond of his name and his position, his money and his influence! She's fond of Woolgreaves; she has become accustomed to its comforts, and she does not choose to give them up!"

"I don't know that Miss A. is to be particularly pitched

into for that, Maude," said Gertrude. "I think, perhaps, we ought to look at home before making any such suggestions! We have become accustomed to the comforts of Woolgreaves, and we—at least I—should be uncommonly sorry to give them up!"

"Well, but we have some claim to them; at all events, we are of uncle's blood, and did not come here designedly, with a view to establish ourselves here, as I'm certain this woman did! And when you talk of our not giving up our present life—look to it!"

"Look, Maude! what do you mean?"

"What do I mean! That we shall have to change our lives very quickly! You don't suppose Marian Ashurst is going to live her life with us as constant reminders to her of what was? You don't suppose that we—that I, at least, am going to waste my life with her as my rock ahead—not I, indeed!"

"Well, Maude," said Gertrude quietly, "I don't suppose anything about anything! I never do. What you propose I shall agree to, and that's all I know, or all I care for!"

It was Marian's wish that the marriage should be delayed for some little time, but Mr. Creswell was of the opposite advice, and thought it would be better to have the ceremony as soon as possible. "Life is very short, Marian," he said, "and I am too old to think of deferring my happiness. I am looking to you as my wife to brighten and soothe the rest of my days, and I am selfish enough to grudge every one of them until you are in that position! It is all very well for young people to have their term of courtship and engagement, and all the rest of it, but you are going to throw yourself away on an old man, dear one"—and he smiled fondly and patted her cheek, "and you must be content to dispense with that, and come to him at once!"

"Content is not the word to express my feelings and wishes in the matter," said Marian; "only I thought that —after Tom's death, so soon, I mean—people might say that it would have been better to have waited till——"

"My dearest child, no waiting would restore my poor boy to me; and I look to you to fill the void in my heart which his loss has made. As for people talking, I have lived too long, child, to pay the slightest heed to what they say. If such gossip moved me one jot, it would rather strengthen my wish to hasten our marriage, as it supplies me with an argument which you evidently have not perceived——"

"And that is——"

"And that is, that you may depend upon it these sticklers for the proprieties and conventionalities, these worshippers of Mrs. Grundy, will be very much interested in our movements, and highly scandalised if, under these fresh circumstances which they have just learned, you remain an inmate of my house. What has been perfectly right and decorous for the last few months would be highly improper for the next few weeks, according to their miserable doctrine. I should not have named this to you, Marian, had not the conversation taken this turn; nor even then, had you been a silly girl and likely to be influenced by such nonsense. However much you might wish to go away and live elsewhere until our marriage, you cannot. Your mother's state of health precludes any possibility of her removal, and therefore the only thing for us to do is to get the marriage over as quickly as possible, and thus effectually silence Mrs. Grundy's disciples."

"Very well," said Marian. "I suppose for the same reason it will be better that the wedding should be here?"

"Here? Why, my dearest Marian, where would you wish it to be?"

"Oh, I should like us to go away to some quiet little place where we were neither of us known, and just walk into the church——"

"And just smuggle through the ceremony and slip away, so that no one should see you were marrying a man old enough to be your father! Is that it, pet? I ought to feel highly complimented, and——"

"Please, not even in joke! No, no; you know what I mean. I cannot explain it, but——"

"I know exactly, darling, but we can't help it. If you wish it, the wedding shall be perfectly quiet, only just ourselves; but it must take place here, and I don't suppose our good neighbours would let it pass off without some demonstration of their regard, whatever we might say to them. By the way, I mentioned it to the girls this morning."

"And what did they say?" Marian asked with, for her, rather unusual eagerness. "Or, rather, what did Maude say; for Gertrude, of course, merely echoed her sister?"

"Poor Gerty!" said Mr. Creswell, smiling; "hitherto she has not displayed much originality. Oh, Maude was very affectionate indeed; came over and kissed me, and wished me all happiness. And, as you say, of course Gertrude did and said ditto. Have they—have they said anything to you?"

"Not a word. I have scarcely seen them since yesterday."

"Ah! They'll take an opportunity of coming to you. I know they are delighted at anything which they think will conduce to my happiness."

"Perhaps they don't think that your marrying me will have that effect," said Marian with a half smile.

"'Please, not even in joke'—it is my turn to say that now," said Mr. Creswell.

It was a perfect godsend to the people of Helmingham, this news; and coming so soon, too—a few months' interval was comparatively nothing in the village—after the excitement caused by young Tom's death. They had never had the remotest idea that Mr. Creswell would ever take to himself a second wife; they had long since given up the idea of speculating upon Marian Ashurst's marriage prospects; and the announcement was almost too much for them to comprehend. Generally, the feeling was one of satisfaction, for the old schoolmaster and Mrs. Ashurst had

both been popular in the village, and there had been much commiseration, expressed with more warmth and honesty than good taste, when it was murmured that the widow and Marian would have to give up housekeeping—an overwhelming degradation in the Helmingham mind—and go into lodgings. A little alloy might have existed in the fact that no new element would be brought into their society, no stranger making her first appearance as the "squire's lady," to be stared at on her first Sunday in church, and discussed and talked over after her first round of visits. But this disappointment was made up to Mrs. Croke and Mrs. Whicher, and others of their set, by the triumph and vindication of their own perspicuity and appreciation of character. They appealed to each other, and to a sympathising audience round a tea-table specially spread, directly authentic confirmation of the news of the intended marriage was received, whether they had not always said that, "That girl's heart was set on money!" That it would take some one "wi' pounds an' pounds" to win her, and they had proved right, and she were now going to be made mistress of Woolgreaves, eh? Money enough there, as Mrs. Whicher told Mrs. M'Shaw, to satisfy even her longing for riches. "But it's not all goold that glitters," said the thrifty housewife; "and it's not all sunshine even then. There's givin' up liberty, and suchlike, to who? It 'minds me of the story of a man as cam' to market wi' a cart-load o' cheeses and grindstones. The cheeses was that beautiful that every one wanted they, but no one bought the grindstones; so seein' this, the man, who were from where your husband comes from, Mrs. M'Shaw, the north, he said he wouldn't sell ere a cheese unless they bought a grindstone at the same time; and so he cleared off the lot. I'm thinkin' that wi' Marian Ashurst the money's the cheese, but she can't take that wi'out the old man, the grindstone." Scarcely anything was said about the singularity of the circumstance that a pretty girl like Marian had not had any lovers. Mrs. Croke remarked that once she thought there would be

"something between" Marian and "that young Joyce," but she was promptly put down; Mrs. Whicher observing scornfully that a girl with Marian's notions of money wasn't likely to have "taken up wi' an usher;" and Mrs. Baker, little Sam's mother, declaring it would have been an awful thing, if true, as she was given to understand that young Joyce had "leff for a soldier," and the last thing heard of him was that he had actually 'listed.

The wedding-day arrived, to Marian's intense relief. She had been haunted by an odd feeling that Walter Joyce might even come to see her, or at all events might write to her, either to induce her to change her resolution or to upbraid her with her perfidy. But he had made no sign, and there was no chance of his doing so now. She was perfectly calm and composed, and steadily contemplated her future, and had made up her mind as to her intended disposal of various persons so soon as she commenced her new path in life. That would not be just yet; they were going away for a fortnight to the seaside, Mrs. Ashurst being left to the care of the girls, who were delighted at the charge. Maude and Gertrude were to be bridesmaids, and no one else was to be officially present at the ceremony save Dr. Osborne, who, as Marian's oldest friend, was to give her away. The little doctor was in the greatest delight at the match, which he looked upon as being somewhat of his own making, though he thought it the best joke in the world to rally Marian by telling her that "her housekeeper project was a much better one than his. He had only thought Mrs. Ashurst might succeed Mrs. Caddy for a little time; but, by George, little Marian all the time intended to make herself head of the house for life!" The villagers, however, were not to be balked of their ceremonial. The bells were rung, general holiday was made, and Marian Creswell, leaning on her husband's arm, walked from the church on flowers strewn on the path by the girls who a few years before had been her school-fellows.

"What an incongruous time for such a letter to arrive!" said Mr. Creswell to Marian, as they were waiting for the carriage to drive to the railway, handing her a paper. She took it and read:

"DEAR SIR,

General E. will be about six weeks hence. Please be prepared. We calculate on you for B.

"Yours truly,

"J. GOULD."

"I can't understand it," said Marian. "Who is General E., and where will he be about six weeks hence? Why are you to be prepared, and what is B. that they calculate on you for?"

"General E.," said Mr. Creswell, laughing, "is the general election, and B. is Brocksopp, for which borough I've promised to stand. However, there's enough of that now. My darling, I hope you will never regret this day."

"I am certain I shall not," she replied, quite calmly.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GIRLS THEY LEFT BEHIND THEM.

It is a conventional, but by no means a correct, notion, that at the time of a social separation those who are left behind have so very much the worst of it. People imagine that those who remain must necessarily be so dull after the departure of their friends; though very frequently those departing are the very persons who have imported gloom and misery into the household, who have sat like social old men and women of the sea on the necks of the jovial Sindbads, who have been skeletons at the feast, and wet blankets, and bottle-stoppers, and kill-joys, and mirth-quenchers, and story-balkers. It is by no means an uncommon occurrence, that there has been no such pleasant music for weeks, in the ears of those remaining in the house, as the noise of the wheels of the carriage speeding the parting guest.

The people of Helmingham village, when they saw the carriage containing Mr. Creswell and his bride spinning away to the station, after indulging in a fresh theme of talk expressive of their surprise at all that had happened, and their delight at the cleverness of the schoolmaster's daughter, who had, as they politely expressed it, "carried her pigs to such a good market," began to discuss the situation at Woolgreaves; and as it had been universally agreed that the day should be made a general holiday, the new-married folk, and their kith and kin, their past and future, were served up as topics of conversation, not merely at the various village tea-tables, but in the commercial room of the Lion at Brocksopp, which, there being no commercial gentlemen staying in the house, had been yielded up to the tenantry on the estate, who were given to understand that Mr. Teesdale, Mr. Creswell's agent, would attend to the bill. It was long since the Lion had

done such a roaring trade, for the commercial gents, by whom the house was chiefly frequented, though convivial souls, were apt to be convivial on small orders, "fours" of rum and "sixes" of brandy; and it was only on exceptional occasions that old Mr. Mulock, who "travelled in hardware," would suffer himself to be fined a crown bowl of punch for having committed the uncommercial atrocity of smoking in the commercial room before seven o'clock, or young Mr. Cunynghame, who represented his own firm in Scotch goods—a very pushing young gentleman, and a wonderful fellow to get on—would "stand champagne round" when he had received a specially remunerative order. But now Miss Parkhurst, in the bar, had not a second to herself, the demand for her strong mahogany-coloured brandy-and-water was so great; steaming jorums of "hot with" here, huge goblets of "cold without" there; the fascinating Hebe of the Lion had not dispensed so much drink at one time since the day when old Major Barth was returned in the Conservative interest for Brocksopp—and the major, it is allowed, was not merely a hard drinker himself, but the cause of hard drinking in others; while as for old Tilley, the jolly landlord, he was so overwhelmed with the exertion of punch-compounding, that he took off the short-tailed snuff-coloured coat which he usually wore, and went to work in his shirt-sleeves, slicing lemons, mixing, strengthening, sweetening—ay, and tasting too—until his pleasant face, always round and red, assumed a greater rotundity and an extra glow, and his little, short, fat body ached again with fatigue.

But, as is very often the case in better society than that with which we are now engaged, the amount of conversation indulged in had not been in equal ratio with the amount of liquor consumed. They were very quiet drinkers in those parts, and on great occasions sat round the council fire as silently and gravely as a set of aboriginal Indians. They had touched lightly on the subject of the wedding, but only as men who knew that they had an interminable subject at hand, ready to fall

back upon whenever they felt disposed, and from that they had jumped at a tangent to discussing the chances of the lambing season, where they were far more at home, and much more practical in what they had to say. The fertility of Farmer Gardner's ewes, or the carelessness of Tom Howson, Farmer Jeffrey's shepherd, were topics which went home to every man present; on which each had a distinct opinion, which he delivered with far greater force and emphasis than when called upon to pronounce upon an analysis of the guiding motives of the human heart in connection with the choice of a husband. Indeed, so much had to be said upon the subject of these "yows," that the conversation began to become rather tiresome to some members of the company, who were also tenants of the bridegroom's, but whose business connections were rather with commerce than agriculture or stock-purchase. These gentry, who would have sat interested for that indefinite period known as "a blue moon," had the talk been of markets, and prices, and "quotations," at length thought it time to vary the intellectual repast, and one of them suggested that somebody should sing a song. In itself not a bad proposition, but one always hard to be properly carried out. A dead silence fell upon the company at once, broken by Farmer Whicher, who declared he had often heard neighbour Croke "wobble like a lavrock," and moved that neighbour Croke be at once called upon. Called upon Mr. Croke was unanimously, but being a man of uncertain temper he nearly spoiled the harmony of the evening by declaring flatly that he would be "darnged" if he would. A bookkeeper in one of the Brocksopp mills, a young man of literary tendencies, who had erected several *in memoriam* tombstones to his own genius in the *Brocksopp Banner and County Chronicle*, then proposed that Mr. M'Shaw, who, as the speaker remarked, "came from the land which produced the inspired exciseman," would favour them with a Scotch ballad. But Mr. M'Shaw declined the compliment. A thrifty man, with a large family, Alick M'Shaw always kept himself in check

in every way where expense was concerned, and now for the first time for years he found himself in the position of being able to consume a large quantity of whisky, without being called upon to pay for it. He knew that the time taken up in singing the ballad would be so much time wasted, during which he must perforce leave off drinking; and so, though he had a pretty tenor voice, and sang very fairly, he pleaded a cold and made his excuse. Finally, everybody having been tried, and everybody having in more or less cantankerous manner refused, it fell upon Farmer Whicher to sing that ditty for which he was well known for a score of miles round, which he had sung for nearly a third of a century at various harvest-homes, shearing-feasts, and other country merry-makings, and which never failed—it being a supposed joyous and bacchanalian chant—in crushing the spirits and subduing the souls of those who listened to it. It was a performance which never varied the smallest iota in its details. The intending singer first laid down his pipe, carefully knocking out the ashes, and placing it by his right hand to act on emergency as a conductor's bâton; then, assuming a most dismal expression of countenance, he glared round into the faces of those surrounding him to sue for pity, or to see if there were any chance of a reprieve, and finding neither, he would clear his throat, which was in itself an operation of some magnitude, and commence the song as a solemn recitation; but the chorus, which was duly sung by all present, each man using the most doleful tune with which he was best acquainted, ran thus:

'Then pŭsh, pŭsh, pŭsh the bōwl about,
And pŭsh the bōwl to me-ee—
The longer we sits here, and drinks,
The merr-ĭ-er we shall be!"

It is doubtful to what extent this doleful dirge might have been protracted, for the number of verses is beyond human reckoning, and the more frequently the choruses were repeated the more they are prolonged; but Mr. Teesdale, the agent, a shrewd man of business, saw his

opportunity for making a cast, and accordingly, at the end of the ninth stanza, he banged the table with such energy that his cue was taken by the more knowing ones, and the harmony was abandoned as Mr. Teesdale went on to say—

"Capital, bravo, excellent! Always look to you, Whicher, to sing us a good song! First time I heard you sing that was years ago, when our old friend Hardy gave us a supper on the occasion of opening his dancing-school! Poor Hardy, not well, eh? or he'd have been here among us. Push the bowl about, eh? Ah, we're likely to have plenty of that sort of fun soon, if I'm correctly informed!"

"What's that, Muster Teesdale?" asked Farmer Adams. "Somebody going to be married, eh?"

"No, no, one at a time, Adams, one at a time!"

"What's comin' off then, Muster Teesdale?"

"Well, it's expected that in about a couple of months' time there'll be a general election, Mr. Adams, and you know what that means! I wasn't far out when I said that the bowl would be pushed about at such a time as that, was I?"

"That 'ee warn't, Muster Teesdale, that 'ee warn't! Not that we hold much wi' 'lections about here!"

"That's 'cos there's no proper spirit of opp'sition," said Mr. Croke, who was accustomed to speak very loudly and freely on political matters, and who was delighted at seeing the conversation taking this turn; "that's 'cos there's no proper spirit of opp'sition," he repeated, looking round him, partly in triumph, partly to see if any antagonist were making ready net and spear. "They Tories is 'lowed to walk over the course and du just as pleases 'em!"

"What sort of opp'sition could you expect, Muster Croke?" said Farmer Spalding, puffing at his long churchwarden. "What good could Lib'rals do in a borough like this here Brocksopp, for instance, where its factories, and works, and mills, and suchlike, are held by rich folk as ought to be Lib'rals and is Tories?"

"Why ought they?" asked Mr. Croke; and while his interlocutor was gathering up his answer, old Croke added, "I'm all for argeyment! I'm a Tory mysel', as all my house have been, but I like to see a opp'sition in everything, and a proper fight, not one-sided 'lections, such as we have seen! Well, Muster Spalding, and why should our rich party folk be Lib'rals and not Tories?"

"Because," said Mr. Spalding, fanning away the smoke from before him, and speaking with great deliberation—"because they sprung from the people, and therefore their symp'ties should be wi' those of whom they were afore they became rich."

"Like enough, like enough, neighbour Spalding. That's what's called mo-rality, that is; but it's not common sense! Common sense is, that it's lucky they grew rich; they becam' Tories, which is the same thing as meaning they wanted their money taken care of."

"Ay, ay, that's it, Croke!" said Farmer Adams. "You've just hit the way to put un! Lib'rals when they've got nothing and want everything, Tories when they've got something and want to take care of it."

"Well, but what's Tories goin' to do this time?" asked Mr. Moule, a maltster in the town. "Our presen' member, Sir George Neal, won't stand again! Told me so his own self last time he was in town for quarter sessions—says he's too old. My 'pinion is his wife won't let un. He's a rum un, is Sir George, and when he gets up to London by himself, he goes it, they *du* say!"

"Nansense, Moule! I wunner at a man *o'* your sense talkin' such stuff," said Farmer Croke. "That's playin' the Lib'ral game, that is!—though I hev understood that Sir George won't come forrerd again."

"And the Lib'rals is going to mek a tre-menjous struggle this time, I've heerd," observed Moule.

"Who are they goin' to bring forrerd, hev you heerd?" asked Mr. Spalding with interest.

"Well, I did hear, but I've a'most forgot," said Mr.

Moule, who was of a misty and a muddled nature. "No, now I reck'lect, it was young Bokenham!"

"What, son of old Tom Bokenham of Blott's Mills?" asked Mr. Spalding.

"That same! Old man's terrible rich, they du say; firm was Bokenham and Sculthorpe, but Sculthorpe broke his leg huntin' wi' Squire Peacock's harriers, and has been out of business for some time."

"He's just built two saw-mills in Galabin Street, hasn't he?" asked Mr. Croke.

"He has, and that plant in Harmer's Row is his too. Young Tom, he's lawyer up in London—lawyer they say, tho' I thowt he was a parson, as they told me he lives in a Temple, and he's wonderful clever in speakin' at club-meetin's and suchlike, and they du say that he's not only a Lib'ral, but,"—and here Mr. Moule sank his voice to a whisper to give due horror to his revelation—"that he's an out-and-out Rad.!"

"You don't say that!" said Farmer Adams, pushing away his chair with a creak, and gazing with terror at the speaker.

"They du!" said Mr. Moule, delighted and astonished to find himself of so much importance.

"That's a bad job!" said Mr. Croke reflectively; "they carry a main lot o' weight in this borough do they Bokenhams—a main lot of weight!"

And Mr. Croke shook his head with great solemnity.

"Don't be down-hearted, Mr. Croke!" said Mr. Teesdale, who had been a silent and an amused spectator of this scene. "No doubt Tommy Bokenham, who they say is a clever chap, and who'll be well backed by his father's banking account, is a formidable opponent. But I much doubt if our side won't be able to bring forward some one with as good a head on his shoulders and as much brass in his pockets!"

"Where's he to be found, Muster Teesdale? Sir George won't stand, and it would welly nigh break any one else's back in the neighbr'ood, 'less it were young Rideout, and all his money goes in horse-racin'!"

"What should you say," said Mr. Teesdale, becoming very much swollen with importance—"what should you say to Mr. Creswell?"

"Muster Creswell! What, Squire Creswell, your master, Muster Teesdale?" exclaimed Croke, completely astounded.

"My *employer*—Squire Creswell, my *employer!*" said Mr. Teesdale, making a mental note to refuse Farmer Croke the very next request he made, no matter what it might be.

"Are you in ayrnest, Muster Teesdale?" asked Spalding. "Is th' old squire comin' forward for Parlyment?"

"He is, indeed, Mr. Spalding," replied Teesdale; "and he'll make the Lion his head-quarters, won't he, Mr. Tilley?" he said to the old landlord, who had just entered bearing a steaming bowl of punch.

"I hope so, sir—I hope so!" said the old man in his cheery voice. "The Lion always was the Blue house. I've seen Sir George Neal, quite dead-beat wi' fatigue and hoarse wi' hollerin', held up at that window by Squire Armstrong on one side, and Charley Rea, him as left here and went away to Chiney or some furrin part, on the other, and screechin' for cheers and Kentish fires and Lord knows what to the mob outside! I ha' got the blue banner somewhere now, that Miss Good, as was barmaid here afore Miss Parkhurst came, 'broidered herself for Sir George at last election."

"Well, there'll be no banners or anything of that kind now, Tilley; that's against the law, that is, but there'll be plenty of fun for all that, and plenty of fighting, for the matter of that, for Mr. Creswell means to win!"

"He really du?" asked Farmer Croke, once more in high spirits.

"He really does! And, what's more, I may tell you, gentlemen, as it's no longer any secret, that Mr. Creswell's candidature is approved by her Majesty's Government, by Sir George Neal, and by the principal county gentlemen,

so that there's no likelihood of any split in the Conservative camp! And as for young Mr. Bokenham, of whom our friend Moule here has told us so much, well—even if he is all that our friend Moule has made him out—we must try and beat him even then!"

Poor Mr. Moule! it was lucky he had enjoyed his temporary notoriety, for the sarcasm of the agent speedily relegated him to his old post of butt and dolt.

The household at Woolgreaves seemed to get on very well during the absence of its legitimate heads. The young ladies rather gloried in their feeling of independence, in the freedom from the necessity of having to consult any one or to exercise the smallest system of restraint, and they took pleasure in sitting with Mrs. Ashurst and ministering to her small wants. They had always had a kindly feeling towards the old lady, and this had been increased by her helplessness, and by her evident unconsciousness of the manner in which the world was slipping away from her. There is something sad in witnessing the struggle for resignation with which persons, smitten with mortal disease, and conscious of their fate, strive to give up all worldly hopes and cares, and to wean their thoughts and aspirations from those things on which they have hitherto been bent; but there is something infinitely more sad in watching the sick-bed of one who is all unconscious of the fiat that has gone forth, who knows, indeed, that her strength is not what it was, but who has no idea that the hand is already uplifted and the dart already poised. Mrs. Ashurst was in this last-named condition; she had gradually been growing weaker and weaker, but there were times when she plucked up wonderfully, and when she would talk of things present, ay, and of things future, as though she had years of life to run. The girls encouraged her to talk. Dr. Osborne had told them that she must be "roused" as much as possible, and they would sit with her and chatter for hours, the old lady taking no incon-

siderable share in the conversation. It was astonishing with what unanimity they had hitherto kept off the subject of the marriage, the very topic which one might have imagined would have been the first they would have discussed; but whenever they came near it, whenever they grew "warm," as children say in the old-fashioned game, they seemed by tacit instinct bound to draw away and leave it untouched. At last one day, after the married couple had been a week absent, Mrs. Ashurst said quietly—

"Maude, my dear, weren't you very much astonished when you heard your uncle was going to marry my Marian?"

"No, dear Mrs. Ashurst. Though I'm not very old, I've lived too long to be astonished at anything, and certainly that did not surprise me!"

"It did me!" said Gertrude, for once venturing on an independent remark.

"And why did it surprise you, Gerty?" asked the old lady, already smiling at the quaint reply which she always expected from Gertrude.

"Because I didn't think uncle was so silly!" Gertrude blurted out. "At least, I don't mean that exactly; don't misunderstand me, dear Mrs. Ashurst, but I never thought that uncle would marry again at all.—Such an idea never entered our heads, did it, Maude?" But Maude declining to play chorus, Gertrude continued: "And if I had thought of such a thing, I should always have set uncle down as marrying some one more his own age, and—and that kind of thing!"

"There is certainly a great disparity of years between them," said Mrs. Ashurst, with a sigh. "I trust that won't work to the disadvantage of my poor dear girl!"

"I don't think you need fear that, dear old friend!" said Maude; and then thinking that her tone of voice might have been hard, she laid her hand on the old lady's shoulder, and added, "Miss Ash—I mean Mrs. Creswell, you know, is wise beyond her years! She has already had the management of a large household, which,

as I understand, she conducted excellently; and even did she show a few shortcomings, uncle is the last man to notice them!"

"Yes, my dear, I know; but I didn't mean that! I was selfishly thinking whether Marian had done rightly in accepting a man so much older than herself. She did it for my sake, poor child—she did it for my sake!" And the old lady burst into tears.

"Don't cry, dear!" said Gertrude. "You are not to blame, I'm sure, whatever has happened."

"How can you make yourself so perfectly ridiculous, Gertrude?" said strong-minded Maude. "No one is to blame about anything! And, my dear Mrs. Ashurst, I don't think, if I were you, I should look upon your daughter's present proceeding as such an act of self-sacrifice. Depend upon it she is very well pleased at her new dignity and position." Maude knew that the Creswells were only "new people," but she could not sit by and hear them patronised by a schoolmaster's widow.

"Well, my dear, very likely," said the old lady meekly; "though she might have been a baronet's lady if she had only chosen. I'm sure young Sir Joseph Attride would have proposed to her, with a little more encouragement; and though my poor husband always said he had pudding in his head instead of brains, that wouldn't have been any just cause or impediment. You never heard about Sir Joseph, Maude?"

"No; Miss Ashurst never spoke to us of any of her conquests," said Maude, with something of a sneer.

"Well, my dear, Marian was never one to say much, you know; but I'm sure she might have done as well as any girl in the county, for the matter of that. There was Sir Joseph, and young Mr. Peacock before he went up to live in London, and a young German who was over here to learn English—Burckhardt his name was, and I think his friends were counts, or something of that kind, in their own country—oh, quite grand, I assure you!"

"I wonder whether uncle knows of all these former rivals?" asked Gertrude.

"No, my dear, of course he doesn't, and of course Marian would not be such a goose as to tell him. I think I'll sleep for a bit now, dears; I'm tired."

They kissed her, and left the room; but before the old lady had dropped off, she said to herself, "I wasn't going to let them crow over me, or think that my Marian couldn't have had her pick and choice of a husband, if she'd been so minded."

Maude and Gertrude were going towards the garden, after leaving Mrs. Ashurst; they saw the postman quitting the door, and the servant came to them with a letter, which she handed to Maude. That young lady opened and read it, but she could scarcely have gone through a few lines, when a particularly stern expression came over her face, her brows were knit, and her lips set tightly together.

"What's the matter, Maude?" asked Gertrude, looking on in wonder. "Who's the letter from?"

"From our new mistress," said the girl; "at least, I expect she intends we should regard her as such—Mrs. Creswell. They are to be at home at the end of next week, and my lady thinks she shall require what is now our music-room for her boudoir. We can have the room at the end of the north passage. Can we, indeed! How very considerate! And it's no use appealing to uncle! He daren't help us, I know! What did I tell you, Gertrude? This woman won't rest until she has crushed us into a state of mere dependence!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

WEDNESDAY'S POST.

LORD HETHERINGTON was a powerful man, who had great influence in most things, but he could not get his letters delivered at Westhope before eleven o'clock. Not that he had not tried. He had, as he expressed it, "put on all kinds of screws," but he could not manage it, and if he had had to wait for the regular delivery by the walking postman, it would have been much later. A groom, however, always attended at the nearest post-town on the arrival of the London mail, and rode over with the Westhope letter-bag, which was unlocked by the butler, and its contents distributed. There was never much curiosity or anxiety about letters exhibited at Westhope, at least, amongst the members of the family. Of course young visitors had occasional faint flutterings of interest about a certain portion of their correspondence, but they were too true to the teachings of their order to allow any vulgar signs of excitement to be visible; while the letters received by Lord and Lady Hetherington were too uniformly dull to arouse the smallest spark of emotion in the breast of any one, no matter how excitably inclined. Lady Caroline Mansergh's correspondence was of a different kind. A clever woman herself, she was in the habit of writing to, and receiving letters from, clever people; but they simply contained gossip and small-talk, which might be read at any time, and which, while pleasant and amusing when taken in due course, did not invite any special eagerness for its acquisition. In a general way, Lady Caroline was quite content to have her letters brought to her in whatever room she might happen to be, but on this Wednesday morning she was seated at the window as the postbag-bearing groom came riding up the avenue, and a few minutes afterwards she stepped out into the hall, where

the butler had the letters out on the table before him, and ran her eye over them.

There it was, that plain, square letter, addressed to him in the firm, plain hand, and bearing the Brocksopp postmark! There it was, his life-verdict, for good or ill. Nothing to be judged of it by its appearance—firm, square, and practical; no ridiculous tremors occasioned by hope or fear could have had anything to do with such a sensible-looking document. What was in it? She would have given anything to know! Not that she seemed to be in the least anxious about it. She had asked where he was, and had been told that he was at work in the library. He was so confident of what Miss Ashurst's answer would be, that he awaited its arrival in the most perfect calmness. Would he be undeceived? Lady Caroline thought not just yet. If the young woman were, as Lady Caroline suspected, playing a double game, she would probably find some excuse for not at once linking her lot with Walter Joyce's—her mother's ill-health seemed expressly suited for the purpose—and would suggest that he should go out first to Berlin, and see how he liked his new employment, returning later in the year, when, if all things seemed convenient, they could be married. She was evidently a clever girl, and these were probably the tactics she would pursue. Lady Caroline wondered whether she was right in her conjecture, and there was the letter, a glance at which would solve her doubts, lying before her! What a ridiculous thing that people were not allowed to read each other's letters! Her ladyship told the butler to see that that letter was sent at once to Mr. Joyce, who was in the library expecting it.

The Westhope household was eminently well drilled, and the footman who handed the letter on the salver to Mr. Joyce was as respectful as though the secretary were my lord himself. He had heard Lady Caroline's remark to the butler, and had turned the missive over and scrutinised it as he carried it along the passages. The handwriting of the address, though firm, was unmistakably

feminine, and the footman, a man of the world, coupling this fact with what he had heard, arrived at the conclusion that the letter was from Mr. Joyce's "young woman." He walked up to Joyce, who was busily engaged in writing, croaked out, "A letter, sir," in the tone usually adopted by him to offer to dinner guests their choice between hock and champagne, and watched the secretary's manner. Joyce took the letter from the salver, muttered his thanks, and turned back to his work. The footman bowed and left the room with the idea, as he afterwards remarked to the butler, that if his suppositions were correct, the secretary was not "a fellow of much warmth of feelin'; looked at it and put it down by his arm as though it was a bill, he did!"

But when the door had shut behind the retreating figure of the Mercury in plush, Walter Joyce threw down his pen and took up the letter, and pressed it to his lips. Then he opened it, not eagerly indeed, but with a bright light in his eyes, and a happy smile upon his lips. And then he read it.

He started at the first line, astonished at the cold tone in which Marian addressed him, but after that he read the letter straight through, without evincing any outward sign of emotion. When he had finished it he paused, and shook his head quickly, as one who has received some stunning blow, and passed his hand rapidly across his brow, then set to work to read the letter again. He had been through it hurriedly before, but this time he read every word, then he pushed the paper from him, and flung himself forward on the desk, burying his face in his hands. Thus he remained during some ten minutes; when he raised himself, his face was very white save round the eyes, where the skin was flushed and strained, and his hands trembled very much. He reeled, too, a little when he first stood up, but he soon conquered that, and began silently pacing the room to and fro. Some time afterwards, when asked to explain what he had felt at that crisis in his life, Joyce declared he could not tell. Not

anger against Marian, certainly, no vindictive rage against her who had treated him so basely. His life was spoiled, he felt that; it had never been very brilliant, or very much worth having, but the one ray which had illumined it had been suddenly extinguished, and the future was in utter darkness. He was in the condition of a man who has been stunned, or has fainted, and to whom the recollection of the events immediately engrossing his attention when, as it were, he was last in life, came but slowly. He had but a confused idea of the contents of Marian's letter. Its general tenor of course he knew, but he had to think over the details. The letter was there, lying before him on the desk where he had thrown it, but he seemed to have an odd but invincible repugnance to reading it again. After a somewhat laborious process of thought he remembered it all. She was going to be married to Mr. Creswell—that was it. She could not face a life of poverty, she said; the comforts and luxuries which she had enjoyed for the last few months had become necessary to her happiness, and she had chosen between him and them. She did not pretend to care for the man she was about to marry; she merely intended to make use of him as the means to an end. Poor Marian! that was a bad state for her to be in—poor Marian! She had jilted him, but she had sacrificed herself: he did not know which was the more forlorn out-look.

Yes, it was all over for him! Nothing mattered much now! Copy out anecdotes from the family chronicles, hunt up antiquities and statistics for those speeches with which Lord Hetherington intended to astonish the world in the forthcoming session, settle down as librarian and secretary for as long as this noble family would have him, and when they kicked him out, live by literary hack work until he found another noble family ready to receive him in the old capacity for a hundred and fifty pounds a year. Why not? He smiled grimly to himself as he thought of the Berlin proposition, and how astonished old Byrne would be when he wrote to decline it—for he should

decline it at once. He had thought about it so often and so much, he had allowed his imagination to feast him with such pictures of himself established there with Marian by his side, that he felt utterly unable to face the dark blank reality, heartbroken and alone. Besides, what motive had he for work now? Experience had taught him that he could always find sufficient press-work in London to keep body and soul together, and what more did he want! What more did—— Was it all real, or was he dreaming? Marian! was it all over between him and her? was she no longer his Marian? was he never to see her, to touch her hand, to hold her in his arms, to live in the light of those loving eyes again? He thought of their last conversation and their parting, he thought of his last letter to her, so full of hope and love; so tender of the past, so full of the future; and there, to that, was the reply lying before him announcing her marriage. Her marriage?—her sale! She had bartered herself away for fine houses, horses, carriages, dresses; she, daughter of James Ashurst, who had loved her as the apple of his eye, and would as soon have thought of her renouncing her religion as of her breaking her plighted word.

It was odd he could not explain it; but his thoughts ran more upon her than upon himself. He found himself picturing her as the squire's lady, taking up her position in society, seated at the head of her table, receiving her guests, at church in the pew which he recollected so well. He recollected the back of her head, and the kneeling figure as he had noticed it Sunday after Sunday when he sat amongst the boys in the school pew immediately behind her, recollected the little grave bow she would give him as she passed to her seat, and the warm hand-pressure with which she always met him after morning service. His love had lived on that warm hand-pressure for days; hers, it seems, was not so easily nourished. He wondered at himself for the way in which he found himself thinking of her. Had the mere notion of such treatment ever entered his mind, he should have been raving; now when

the actual fact had occurred, he was quiet. He ran through the whole matter in his mind again, pointed out to himself the deception that she had practised on him, the gross breach of faith of which she had been guilty, showed himself plainly how her desertion of him had sprung from the basest motives, not from lack of love for him, not from overweening fancy for another—those were human motives and might be pardoned her—but from mere avarice and mammon-worship. And, after cogitating over all this, he felt that he pitied rather than hated her, and that as to himself he had not the remotest care what became of him.

A knock at the door, and before he could answer Lady Caroline had entered the room. Joyce was rather pleased than otherwise at the interruption. He had taken her ladyship so far into his confidence that it was impossible to hide from her this last act in the drama, and it was infinitely pleasanter that the explanation should come about here—accidentally, as it were—than that he should have to seek her with his story.

"Good morning, Mr. Joyce."

"Good morning, Lady Caroline."

"Mr. Joyce, a triumphal procession, consisting of Lady Hetherington and the new housekeeper, is marching round the house, settling what's to be done in each room between this and the autumn. I confess I have not sufficient strength of mind to be present at those solemn rites, and as this is the only room in the house in which no change ever takes place—save the increase of dust, and lately the acquisition of a *bonâ-fide* student—I have taken refuge here, and have brought the *Times* in order that I may be sure not to disturb you by chattering."

"You will not disturb me in the least, I assure you."

"Why, what a dreadfully hollow voice! and—Mr. Joyce," continued Lady Caroline, changing her tone, "how very unwell you look—so strangely pale and drawn! Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing in the least!" he replied. "You have been good enough to let me talk to you about myself

and my hopes and aspirations, Lady Caroline Mansergh. You have probably forgotten"—ah, man, devoid of the merest accidence of worldly grammar!—"you have probably forgotten that this is the morning on which I was to expect my answer from Miss Ashurst. It has come! It is here!" and he stooped forward, picked from the table the letter, and handed it to her.

Lady Caroline seemed rather surprised at this mode of proceeding. She took the letter from Walter's hand, but held it unopened before her, and said—

"You wish me to read it?"

"If you please," he replied. "There is no other way by which you could exactly comprehend the situation, and I wish you to be made aware of it—and—and to advise me in it."

Lady Caroline blushed slightly as she heard these last words, but she said nothing—merely bowed and opened the letter. As she read it, the flush which had died away returned more brightly than before, her eyes could not be seen under their downcast lids, but the brows were knit, the nostrils trembled, and the mouth grew hard and rigid. She read the letter through twice; then she looked up, and her voice shook as she said—

"That is a wicked and base letter, very heartless and very base!"

"Lady Caroline!" interrupted Joyce appealingly.

"What! do you seek to defend it?—no, not to defend it, for in your own heart you must know I am right in my condemnation of it, but to plead for it. You don't like to hear me speak harshly of it—that's so like a man! I tell you that it is a heartless and an unwomanly letter! 'Deepens the pain with which she writes,' indeed! 'Deepens the pain!' and what about yours? It is her nature to love money and comforts, and luxuries, and to shrink from privations. Her nature! What was she bred to, this duchess?"

In his misery at hearing Marian thus spoken of, since the blow had fallen upon him he had never been so miser-

able as then, when she was attacked, and he saw the impossibility of defending her. Joyce could not help remarking that he had never noticed Lady Caroline's beauty so much as at that moment, when her eyes were flashing and her ripe lips curling with contempt. But he was silent, and she proceeded—

"She says you are better without her, and, though of course you doubt it, I am mightily disposed to agree with her! I—Mr. Joyce!" said her ladyship, suddenly softening her tone, "believe me, I feel earnestly and deeply for you under this blow! I fear it is none the less severe because you don't show how much you suffer. This—this young lady's decision will of course materially affect the future which you had plotted out for yourself, and of which we spoke the last time we were here together?"

"Oh yes, of course. Now I shall—by the way, Lady Caroline, I recollect now—it scarcely impressed me then—that during that conversation you seemed to have some doubts as to what Marian—as to what might be the reply to the letter which I told you I had written?"

"I certainly had."

"And you endeavoured to wean me from the miserable self-conceit under which I was labouring, and failed. I recollect your hints now. Tell me, Lady Caroline, why was I so blind? What made you suspect?"

"My dear Mr. Joyce, you were blind because you were in love! I suspected because, being merely a looker-on—an interested one, I acknowledge, for I had a great interest in your welfare, but still merely a looker-on, and therefore, according to the old proverb, seeing most of the game—I could not help noticing that the peculiar position of affairs, and the length of time you remained without any news of your *fiancée*, afforded grave grounds of suspicion."

"Yes," said poor Walter; "as you say, I am blind. I never noticed that."

"Now, Mr. Joyce," said Lady Caroline, "the question is not with the past, but with the future. What do you intend doing?"

"I have scarcely thought. It matters very little."

"Pardon my saying that it matters very much. Do you think of taking up this appointment for the newspaper that you spoke of—this correspondentship in Berlin?"

"No; I think not. I really don't know—I thought of remaining as I am."

"What! pass the rest of your life in writing Lord Hetherington's letters, and cramming him for speeches which he will never deliver?"

"It is an honest and an easy way of earning a living, at all events."

"Of earning a living? And are you going to content yourself with 'earning your living,' Mr. Joyce?"

"Oh, Lady Caroline, why should I do anything else? The desire for making money has gone from me altogether with the receipt and perusal of that letter. She was the spur that urged me on; my dreams of fame and wealth and position were for her, not for myself; and now——"

"And now you are going to abandon it all—do you mean to tell me that? That you, a young man possessing intellect, and energy, and industry, with a career before you, are about to abandon that career, and to condemn yourself to vegetation—sheer and simple vegetation, mind, not life—merely because you have been grossly deceived by a woman, who, your common sense ought to have told you, has been playing you false for months, and who, as she herself confesses, has all her life rated the worthiness of people as to what they were worth in money? You are clearly not in your right mind, Mr. Joyce. I am surprised at you!"

"What would you have me do, Lady Caroline? You sneer at the notion of my remaining with Lord Hetherington. Surely you would not have me go to Berlin?"

"I never sneer at anything, my dear Mr. Joyce; sneering shows very bad breeding. I say distinctly that I think you would be mad to fritter away your days in your present position. Nor do I think, under circumstances, you ought to go to Berlin. It would have done very well

as a stepping-stone had things turned out differently; but now you would be always drawing odious comparisons between your solitary lot and the 'what might have been,' as Owen Meredith so sweetly puts it."

"Where, then, shall I go?"

"To London. Where else should any one go with a desire to make a mark in the world, and energy and determination to aid him in accomplishing his purpose? And this is your case. Ah, you may shake your head, but I tell you it is. You think differently just now, but when once you are there, 'in among the throngs of men,' you will acknowledge it. Why, when you were there, at the outset of your career, utterly friendless and alone, as you have told me, you found friends and work; and now that you are known, and by a certain few appreciated, do you think it will be otherwise?"

"You are marvellously inspiriting, Lady Caroline, and I can never be sufficiently grateful for the advice you have given me—better still, for the manner in which you have given it. But suppose I do go to London, what—in the cant phrase of the day—what am I to 'go in for'?"

"Newspaper-writing—what do they call it?—journalism, at first; the profession in which you were doing so well when you came here. That, if I mistake not, will in due course lead to something else, about which we will talk at some future time."

"That is just what I was coming to, Lady Caroline. You will allow me to see you sometimes?"

"I shall be always deeply interested in your welfare, Mr. Joyce, and anxious to know how you progress. Oh yes; I hope both to see and hear a great deal of you. Besides, Lord Hetherington may feel inclined to take up the chronicles again; he is rather off them just now, I know; and then you can give your successor some very valuable hints."

When Lady Caroline Mansergh was alone in her own room after this conversation, she reflected long and deeply upon the effect which the receipt of that letter would

probably produce upon Walter Joyce, and was sufficiently interested to analyse her own feelings in regard to it. Was she sorry or glad that the intended match had been broken off, and that Joyce was now, so far as his heart was concerned, a free man? That he was free she was certain; that he would never return to the old allegiance she was positive. Lady Caroline in her worldly experience had frequently come across cases of the kind, where the tender regret which at first forbade any harsh mention, scarcely any harsh thought of the false one, had in a very short time given place to a feeling of mortified vanity and baffled desire, which prompted the frankest outpourings, and made itself heard in the bitterest objurgations. The question was, how it affected her. On the whole, she thought that she was pleased at the result. She did not attempt to hide from herself that she had a certain regard for this young man, though of the nature of that regard she had scarcely troubled herself to inquire. One thing she knew, that it was very different from what she had at first intended it should be, from what in the early days of their acquaintance she had allowed it to be. Of course, with such a man, flirtation, in its ordinary sense, was out of the question; she would as soon have thought of flirting with the Great Pyramid as with Walter Joyce. In its place there had existed a kind of friendly interest; but Lady Caroline was fully cognisant that, on her side, that friendly interest had been deepening and strengthening, until, after a little self-examination, she felt forced to confess to herself that it would bear another name. Then came the question, And if it did, what matter? She had never particularly set herself up as a strict observant of the conventionalities or the fetish worship of society; on the contrary, her conduct in that respect had been rather iconoclastic. There need be no surprise, therefore, on the part of the world if she chose to marry out of what was supposed to be her "set" and station in society; and if there had been, she was quite strong-minded enough to laugh at it. But to a woman of Lady Caroline's refine-

ment it was necessary that her husband should be a gentleman, and it was necessary for her pride that, if not her equal in rank, he should not merely be her superior in talent, but should be admitted to be so. Under the fresh disposition of circumstances she saw no reason why this should not be. Walter Joyce would go to London, would there resume his newspaper occupations, and would probably, as she guessed from occasional hints he had recently let fall, turn his attention more to politics than he had hitherto done. He must be clever, she thought. She knew him to be clever, in a woman's notion of cleverness, which was so different to a man's; but he must surely be clever in a man's way too, or they would never have offered him this Berlin appointment, which, according to her notions, required not merely a bright literary style, but, in a far greater degree, the faculty of observation and knowledge of the world. His experience had been very small, but his natural ability and natural keenness must be great. Granted his possession of these gifts, pushed as he would be by her influence—for she intended to give him some excellent introductions—there was little doubt of his success in life, and of his speedily achieving a position which would warrant her in accepting him. In accepting him? Lady Caroline laughed outright, rather a hard bitter laugh, as this idea crossed her mind, at the remembrance that Walter Joyce had never said the slightest word, or shown the smallest sign, that he cared for her as—as she wished to be cared for by him, much less that he ever aspired to her hand. However, let that pass! What was to be, would be, and there was plenty of time to think of such things. Meanwhile, it was decidedly satisfactory that the engagement was broken off between him and that girl, whom Lady Caroline had been accustomed to regard as a simple country wench, a bread-and-butter miss, but who certainly had done her jilting with a coolness and *aplomb* worthy of a London beauty in her third season. She would have been a drag on Walter's life; for, although ambitious to a degree, and always

wanting to rise beyond her sphere, she would have induced him to persevere at his work, and have encouraged him to great efforts; yet, according to Lady Caroline's idea, fame could not be achieved when a man was surrounded by babies requiring to be fed, and other domestic drawbacks, and had not merely himself but a large family to drag up the hill of difficulty, ere eminence was attained. Now Walter would be really free, even from mental ties, Lady Caroline thought, with a half sigh, and if he were ever to do anything worthy of himself, the beginning at least should be now.

The conversation with Lady Caroline Mansergh had not merely the effect of diverting Walter Joyce's thoughts from the contemplation of his own unhappiness for the time being, but rousing within him certain aspirations which he had scarcely ever previously entertained, and which, when they had occasionally arisen in his mind, he had successfully endeavoured to stifle and ignore. No doubt the advice which Lady Caroline had given him was most excellent, and should be followed. There was a future before him, and a brilliant one! He would prove to Marian (already his feelings towards her were beginning to change)—he would prove to Marian that his life was not made utterly blank on account of her cruel treatment; on the contrary, he would try and achieve some end and position, such as he would never have aspired to if he had remained in the calm jog-trot road of life he had planned for himself. He would go to London, to old Byrne, and see whether instead of being sent to Berlin he could not be received on the staff of the paper in London; and he would turn his attention to politics—old Byrne would be of immense use to him there—and he would study and work night and day. Anything to get on, anything to become distinguished, to make a name!

His decision once taken, Joyce lost no time in communicating it to Lord Hetherington. He said that circumstances of great family importance necessitated his immediate return to London, and would require all the

attention he could bestow on them for many months to come. Lord Hetherington was a little taken aback by the suddenness of the announcement, but as he had always had a kindly feeling towards Joyce, and since the day of the ice-accident he had regarded him with especial favour, he put the best face he could on the occasion, and expressed his great regret at his secretary's intended departure. His lordship begged that when Mr. Joyce had any leisure time at his disposal he would call upon him at Hetherington House, where they would be always glad to see him; and Joyce trusted that if ever his lordship thought that he (Joyce) could be useful to him in any way, more especially as connected with the chronicles, with which he was so familiar, he would do him the honour to send for him, through Mr. Byrne, who would always know his address. And thus they parted, after the interview, with mutual expressions of goodwill.

This was a little excitement for Lord Hetherington, who at once started off, so soon as Joyce had left him, to tell her ladyship the news.

Lady Hetherington was far more interested in the fact that the secretary had given warning, as she persisted in calling it, than her husband had anticipated. She had always, except when temporarily aroused on the occasion of the accident, been so determined to ignore Mr. Joyce's existence, or had treated him with such marked coldness when compelled to acknowledge it, that his lordship was quite astonished to see how interested she showed herself, how she persisted in cross-questioning him as to what Joyce had stated to be the cause of his leaving, and as to whether he had mentioned it to any other person in the house. On being assured by her husband that he had come straight to her boudoir after parting with the secretary, Lady Hetherington seemed pleased, and strictly enjoined the little lord not to mention it to any one.

They were a very small party at dinner that day, only Mr. Biscoe being present in addition to the members of the family. The conversation was not very brisk, the countess

being full of the coming London season, a topic on which Mr. Biscoe, who hated town, and never went near it when he could help it, could scarcely expect to be enthusiastic, Lord Hetherington being always silent, and Lady Caroline on this occasion preoccupied. But when the cloth was removed, and the servants had left the room, Lady Hetherington, in the interval of playing with a few grapes, looked across at her sister-in-law, and said—

"By the way, Caroline, Lord Hetherington's secretary has given warning!"

"You mean that Mr. Joyce is going away, is that it? I thought so, but you have such a curious way of putting things, Margaret!"

"How should I have put it? I meant exactly what I said!"

"Oh, of course, if you choose to import the phraseology of the servants'-hall into your conversation, you are at perfect liberty to do so."

"Anyhow, the fact remains the same. We are to be bereaved of the great secretary! Weren't you astonished when I told you?"

"Not the least in the world!"

"Because you had heard it before?"

"Exactly!"

"From Lord Hetherington?"

"Oh no!" laughed Lady Caroline; "don't scold poor dear West on the idea that he had anticipated you! I heard it from Mr. Joyce himself."

"Oh, of course you did!" said Lady Hetherington, slightly tossing her head. "Well, of course you're very much grieved. He was such a favourite of yours."

"Just because I like Mr. Joyce very much, or, as you phrase it, because he is a favourite of mine, I'm very pleased to think that he's going away. A man of his abilities is lost in his present position."

"I quite agree with you, Lady Caroline," said Mr. Biscoe. "Sound scholar, Mr. Joyce, clear head, well grounded, and quick at picking up—good fellow, too!"

"I'm sure," said Lord Hetherington, "I've grown so accustomed to him, I shall feel like—what's-his-name—fish out of water without him."

"I dare say we shall manage to exist when Mr. Joyce has left us," said the countess; "we scrambled on somehow before, and I really don't see the enormous improvement since he came."

Nobody commented on this, and the conversation dropped. Lady Hetherington was cross and disappointed. She expected to have found her sister-in-law very much annoyed at the fact of Mr. Joyce's departure, whereas, in place of visible grief or annoyance, there was a certain air of satisfaction about Lady Caroline which was dreadfully annoying to the countess.

Two days after, Joyce left for London, Marian's letter, on Lady Caroline's advice, and in accordance with his own feelings, remaining without notice.

CHAPTER XXIV.

POOR PAPA'S SUCCESSOR.

It has been seen that Mr. Creswell's marriage with Marian Ashurst was sufficiently popular amongst the farmer class at Helmingham, but it was by no means so warmly received in other grades of society. Up at the Park, for instance, the people could scarcely restrain their indignation. Sir Thomas Churchill had always been accustomed to speak of "my neighbour, Mr. Creswell," as a "highly respectable man, sprung, as he himself does not scruple to own, from the people," chirrupped the old Sir Thomas, whose great-grandfather had been a tanner in Brocksopp,—"but eminently sound in all his views, and a credit to the—ahem!—commercial classes of the community." They sat together on the magistrates' bench, met

on committees of charitable associations, and suchlike, and twice a year solemnly had each other to dinner to meet a certain number of other county people on nights when there was a moon, or, at least, when the calendar showed that there ought to have been one. In the same spirit old Lady Churchill, kindliest of silly old women, had been in the habit of pitying Marian Ashurst. "That charmin' girl, so modest and quiet; none of your fly-away nonsense about her, and clever, ain't she? I don't know about these things myself, but they tell me so; and to have to go into lodgin's, and all that! father a clergyman of the Church of England too!"—staunch old lady, never moving about without the Honourable Miss Grimstone's Church-service, in two volumes, in her trunk—"it really does seem too bad!" But when the news of the forthcoming marriage began to be buzzed about, and penetrated to the Park, Sir Thomas did not scruple to stigmatise his neighbour as an old fool, while my lady had no better opinion of Miss Ashurst than that she was a "forward minx." What could have so disturbed these exemplary people? Not, surely, the low passions of envy and jealousy? Sir Thomas Churchill, a notorious *roué* in his day, who had married the plainest-headed woman in the county for her money, all the available capital of which he had spent, could not possibly be envious of the fresh young bride whom his old acquaintance was bringing home? And Lady Churchill, to whom the village gossips talked incessantly of the intended redecoration of Woolgreaves, the equipages and horses which were ordered, the establishment which was about to be kept up, the position in parliament which was to be fought for, and, above all, the worship with which the elderly bridegroom regarded the juvenile bride-elect—these rumours did not influence her in the bitter depreciation with which she henceforth spoke of the late schoolmaster's daughter? Of course not! The utterances of the baronet and his lady were prompted by a deep regard to the welfare of both parties, and a wholesome regret that they had been prompted to take a step

which could not be for the future happiness of either, of course.

Mr. Benthall, who, it will be recollected, had succeeded the late Mr. Ashurst at the Helmingham school, and was comparatively new to the neighbourhood, took but little interest in the matter, so far as Miss Ashurst was concerned. He had a bowing acquaintance with her, but he had neither had the wish nor the opportunity of getting on more familiar terms. Had she married any one else but Mr. Creswell, it would not have mattered one jot to the Rev. George Benthall; but, as it happened, Mr. Benthall had a certain amount of interest in the doings of the household at Woolgreaves, and the marriage of the chief of that household promised to be an important event in Mr. Benthall's life.

You could scarcely have found a greater difference between any two men than between James Ashurst and his successor. When James Ashurst received his appointment as head-master at Helmingham, he looked upon that appointment as the culmination of his career. Mr. Benthall regarded the head-mastership as merely a stepping-stone to something better. Mr. Ashurst threw his whole soul into his work. Mr. Benthall was content to get people to think that he was very hard-working and very much interested in his duties, whereas he really cared nothing about them, and slipped through them in the most dilettante fashion. He did not like work; he never had liked it. At Oxford he had taken no honours, made no name, and when he was nominated to Helmingham, every one wondered at the selection except those who happened to know that the fortunate man was godson to one of the two peers who were life-governors of the school. Mr. Benthall found the Helmingham school in excellent order. The number of scholars never had been so large, the social status of the class which furnished them was undeniably good, the discipline had been brought to perfection, and the school had an excellent name in the county. It had taken James Ashurst years to effect this, but once achieved,

there was no necessity for any further striving. Mr. Benthall was a keen man of the world, he found the machine in full swing, he calculated that the impetus which had been given to it would keep it in full swing for two or three years, without the necessity for the smallest exertion on his part, and during these two or three years he would occupy himself in looking out for something better. What that something better was to be he had not definitely determined. Not another head-mastership, he had made up his mind on that point; he never had been particularly partial to boys, and now he hated them. He did not like parochial duty, he did not like anything that gave him any trouble. He did like croquet-playing and parsonical flirtation, cricket and horse exercise. He liked money, and all that money brings; and, after every consideration, he thought the best and easiest plan to acquire it would be to marry an heiress.

But there were no heiresses in those parts, and very few marriageable girls. Mr. Benthall had met the two young ladies from Woolgreaves at several garden-parties, and had conceived a special admiration for Gertrude Creswell. Maude was far too grand, and romantic, and self-willed for his taste, but there was something in Gertrude's fresh face and quaint simple manner that was particularly pleasing to him. But after making careful inquiries, Mr. Benthall discovered that Miss Gertrude Creswell's chance of wealth was but small, she being entirely dependent on her uncle, whose affections were known to be entirely concentrated on his son. She might have a few hundred pounds perhaps, but a few hundred pounds would not be sufficient to enable Mr. Benthall to give up the school, and to live idle for the rest of his life. The notion must be given up, he feared. He was very sorry for it, for he really liked the girl very much, and he thought she liked him. It was a bore, a nuisance, but the other thing was impossible!

Then came Tom Creswell's death, and that gave affairs another aspect. There was no son now to inherit all the

accumulated wealth. There were only the two nieces, between whom the bulk of the property would doubtless be divided. That was a much more healthy outlook for Mr. Benthall. If matters eventuated as he imagined, Miss Gertrude would not merely have a sufficiency, but would be an heiress, and under this expectation Mr. Benthall, who had not seen much of the young ladies of Woolgreaves for some time, now took every opportunity of throwing himself in their way. These opportunities were tolerably frequent, and Mr. Benthall availed himself of them with such skill and success, that he had finally made up his mind to propose for Gertrude Creswell's hand, with the almost certainty of acceptance, when the news came down to the village that Mr. Creswell was going to be married to Marian Ashurst. That was a tremendous blow! From what Mr. Benthall had heard about Miss Ashurst's character in the village, there was little doubt in his mind that she had deliberately planned this marriage with a view to the acquisition of fortune and position, and there was no doubt that she would hold to both. The chance of any inheritance for the girls was even worse than it would have been if Tom had lived. In that case a sense of justice would have impelled the old gentleman to do something for his nieces, but now he would be entirely under the sway of this money-loving woman, who would take care to keep everything to herself. It was a confounded nuisance, for in regard to Gertrude Creswell Mr. Benthall had progressed considerably beyond the "liking" stage, and was really very much attached to her. What could be done? It would be impossible for him to marry a portionless girl. It would be utterly useless for him to ask her uncle to endow her, as Mr. Creswell would at once refer the question to his new wife, who—as he, Mr. Benthall, happened to know from one or two little scenes at which he had been present, and one or two little circumstances of which he had heard—was by no means lovingly inclined towards the young ladies who had become her step-nieces. It was

horribly provoking, but Mr. Benthall could not see his way at all.

One evening, some two or three days after Mr. Creswell's marriage, Mr. Benthall was sitting in his study, when there came a knock at the door, and a smart housemaid entering told him that Mrs. Covey had come back, and would be glad to see her master. Mrs. Covey was an old woman who for many years had lived as cook with the Ashursts, and who, on their recommendation, had been accepted in a similar capacity by Mr. Benthall, on his assumption of office. But the old lady had been away from her work for some few weeks with a sharp attack of illness, which rendered her unfit for her duties, and she had been staying with a married daughter some miles on the other side of Brocksopp. A few days previously she had reported herself as cured, and as about to return to her place, and in due time she arrived at the school-house. Mr. Benthall was glad to hear of the old woman's safe return; not that he cared in the least about her, or any other old woman, but she understood the place, and did her duty well, and some of the boarders had given decided evidence of the unpopularity of Mrs. Covey's *locum tenens* by leaving their dinners untouched, and making their meals in furtive snatches from their lockers during school-hours of provisions purchased at the "tuck-shop." This sort of mutiny annoyed Mr. Benthall considerably, and consequently he was very glad to have the news of Mrs. Covey's recovery, and gave orders that she should be sent up to him at once.

Whatever might have been the nature of Mrs. Covey's illness, it certainly had not had the effect of toning down her complexion. She was a singularly red-faced old lady, looking as if constant exposure to large fires had sent the blood to her cheeks and kept it there, and she wore a very fierce little black front, with two screwy little curls just in front of either ear, and in honour of her return and of her presentation to her master, she had put on a gigantic structure of net and ribbon which did duty for a cap.

She seemed greatly pleased at the notice which Mr. Benthall took of her, and at the interest he seemed to show in her recovery, but nothing would induce her to be seated in his presence, though he repeatedly urged the advisability of her resting herself after her journey. Finding her obdurate in this matter, Mr. Benthall let the old lady have her way, and after he had chatted with her about her illness, and about her family, he thought he had exhausted the topics of interest between them, and inwardly wished she would go. But as she evinced no intention of stirring, he was obliged to cast about for something to say, and oddly enough hit upon a subject, the discussion of which with this old woman was destined to have a certain amount of influence on his future life.

"Well, we've had wonderful changes here in Helmingham since you've been away, Mrs. Covey," he remarked.

"Ah! so I did heer, sir!" said the old woman. "Poor old Muster Pickering gone to his feaythers, and Mrs. Slater's bad leg brokken out again, and not likely to heal this time, Anne told me Dr. Osborne says."

"Ay, ay, but I'm not talking about old Pickering or Mrs. Slater. I mean the wedding—the great wedding!"

"Ah, well, I've heerd nowt o' that," said Mrs. Covey; adding in a grumbling undertone, "I'm a stupid owd woman, and they tell me nowt."

"Not heard of it? Well, I wonder at that," said Mr. Benthall, "more especially as it concerns your young mistress that was—Miss Ashurst, I mean!"

"What, is she married at last?" asked the old woman.

"She is indeed, and to Mr. Creswell—Squire Creswell of Woolgreaves——"

"What!" screamed Mrs. Covey, falling backward into the chair, which was fortunately close behind her. "You don't tell me that!"

"I do indeed! When was it?—last Thursday. The —the happy couple" (and Mr. Benthall gave a cynical

grin as he said the words)—"the happy couple are away now on their wedding-trip."

"Well, I niver did! I niver did! The old squire to come and marry Miss Marian! He that was allays so mumchance and so meek, and had a sweet tooth in 's head after all! I thowt it was to talk wi' the poor old master about book-larnin' and such stuff that he comed here! I'd niver an idee that he'd an eye for the young gell."

"Only shows how sly these old gentlemen can be when they choose, Mrs. Covey," said Mr. Benthall, much amused, "if they can deceive such sharp eyes as yours."

"Dear heart, I've no cause to call mine sharp eyes any longer, I think," said the old woman, shaking her head, "for I was took in by both on 'em. I niver thowt Miss Marian would throw t'other one over, that I niver did."

"What's that you're saying, Mrs. Covey?" asked Mr. Benthall, sharply.

"I was sayin' that I allays thowt Miss Marian would howld by the t'other one, and——"

"Other one? What other one? I never heard of there being any 'other one,' as you call it, in regard to Miss Ashurst."

"No! You didn't, I dare say! Nor didn't not no one else!" said the old lady, with a frightful redundancy of negatives; "but *I* did."

"And who was this 'other one,' if one may ask, Mrs. Covey?"

"One may ask, and there's only one can answer, and that one's me. Ah, well, there's no harm in tellin', now that she's married, and all that, though I niver opened my mouth about it before to livin' soul, hopin' it would come all right like. Miss Marian were keepin' company wi' young Joyce!"

"Joyce! Joyce!" repeated Mr. Benthall. "What, young Mr. Joyce, who was one of Mr. Ashurst's masters here?"

"That very same! ay, and he were Miss Ashurst's

master, he were, at the time I'm speakin' of!" said the old woman.

"Too much kitchen-fire has brought on softening of this old person's brain!" said Mr. Benthall to himself. "There can't be a shadow of foundation for what she says, or I should surely have heard of it in the village!" Then aloud, "What makes you think this, Mrs. Covey?"

"What meks me think it? Why, my own eyesight meks me think it, and that's the best think I can have i' the matter," replied the old woman, waxing rather cross at her master's evident incredulity. "Nobody niver spoke of it, becos' nobody knowed it; but I've sat at the kitchen-window o' summer nights and seen 'em walkin' roun' the garden for hours thegither, hand in hand, or him wi' his arms round her waist, and I know what that means, tho' I may be an old fool!"

"No, no, Mrs. Covey, no one ever thought that for a minute," said Mr. Benthall, anxious to soothe the old woman's offended dignity, and really very much interested in the news she had given him. "No doubt you're quite correct, only, as I had never heard a hint of this before, I was rather startled at the suddenness of the announcement, Tell me now, had Mr. Ashurst any notion of what was going on?"

"Wasn't the schoolmaster, poor feckless critter, allays buzzed in th' heed wi' book-larnin' and troubles o' all sorts? No bittle as iver flew war blinder, nor deafer, than my poor owd master in matters what didn't concern him!"

"Nor Mrs. Ashurst?"

"Ah, the poor sickly thing, wi' pains here and aches there, and so dillicate, and niver 'nuff strength to look after what she ought, let alone anything else! No! they kept it to themselves, the young pipple, and nobody knowed nowt about it but me, and they didn't know as I knew, for the kitchen-window, as you know, is hid wi' fuzz and creepers, and you can see out wi'out bein' seen! Lor, lor, and so she's gone and married that owd man! And t'other one's gone for a sojer, they say, and all that

story, as I used to sit i' the kitchen and make up in my head, will niver be! Lor, lor, what a world it is!"

Mr. Benthall was very much surprised at the information which had come to him in that odd way. He had never thought much about Marian Ashurst, but he knew perfectly well that popular opinion in Helmingham and the neighbourhood held to the fact that she had never had any love affair. He was disposed to regard her with rather more favour than before, for if what Mrs. Covey stated of her were true, it showed that at one time she must have possessed a heart, though she had allowed herself to ignore its promptings under the overweening influence of avarice. Mr. Benthall thought a good deal over this story. He wondered when, how, and under what circumstances Miss Ashurst had broken her engagement, if such engagement existed, with Joyce. Whether she had deliberately planned her marriage with old Creswell, and had consequently abandoned the other design; or whether the old gentleman had proposed suddenly to her, and the temptation of riches and position being too great for her to withstand, she had flung her first lover aside on the spur of the moment, and thereby, perhaps, rendered herself wretched for life. Or what was it that the old woman said, about Joyce enlisting as a soldier? Perhaps that step on her lover's part had been the cause of Miss Ashurst's determination. No! on reflection, the enlisting, if he ever did enlist, looked like a desperate act on Joyce's part, done in despair at hearing the news of Marian's intended marriage! Mr. Benthall did not pin much faith to the enlisting part of the story. He had heard a good deal about Joyce from various sources, and he felt confident that he was by no means the kind of man who would be led to the perpetration of any folly of the kind. Mr. Benthall was puzzled. With any other two people he could have understood the hand in hand, and the arm-encircled waist, as meaning nothing more than a pleasant means of employing the time, mean-

ing nothing, and to be forgotten by both persons when they might chance to be separated. But Mr. Joyce and Miss Ashurst were so essentially earnest and practical, and so utterly unlikely to disport themselves in the manner described without there had been a sincere attachment between them, that, taking all this into consideration in conjunction with the recent marriage, Mr. Benthall came to the conclusion that either Mrs. Covey must have, unintentionally of course, deceived herself and him, or that there was something remarkably peculiar in the conduct of Miss Ashurst, something more peculiar than pleasant or estimable. He wondered whether Gertrude or Maude had any suspicions on the matter. They had neither of them ever spoken to him on the subject, but then Maude generally left him alone with Gertrude, and when he and Gertrude were together, they had other things than other people's love-affairs to talk about. He had not been up to Woolgreaves since the wedding, had not—which was quite a different matter—seen either of the girls. He would ride over there the next afternoon, and see how matters progressed.

Accordingly the next day, while Maude and Gertrude were walking in the garden and discussing Mrs. Creswell's newly arrived letter, or rather while Maude was commenting on it, and Gertrude, as usual, was chorusing her assent to all her sister said, they saw Mr. Benthall, at the far end of a long turf walk, making towards them. Immediately on recognising the visitor Maude stopped talking, and looked suddenly round at Gertrude, who, of course, blushed a very lively crimson, and said, "Oh, Maud, I wish you wouldn't!"

"Wish I wouldn't what, Gertrude?"

"Make me so hot and uncomfortable!"

"My dear, *I* don't make you hot and uncomfortable! We have been talking together for the last half-hour perfectly quietly, when suddenly—why, of course, it's impossible for me to say—you blush to the roots of your hair, and accuse me of being the cause!"

"No; but, Maude, you don't mind his coming?"

"No indeed, Gertrude, I like *him*, if you mean Mr. Benthall, as of course you do, very much; and if you and he are both really in earnest, I think that you would. Here he is!"

"Good day, ladies!" said Mr. Benthall, advancing with a bow. "I haven't seen you since you were left deserted and forlorn, so I thought I would come over and ask what news of the happy couple."

"They will be back at the end of the week; we heard from Mrs. Creswell this morning."

"Ah, ha, from the blushing bride! And how is the blushing bride, and what does she say?"

"She makes herself rather more odious and disagreeable than ever!" said Gertrude. "Oh, I don't mind, Maude! Geo—Mr. Benthall knows precisely what I feel about Miss Ashurst and her 'superior' ways and manners and nonsense!"

"What has she done now?"

"Oh, she has—no, Maude, I will speak! She has written to say that Maude must give up her music-room, you know, where she always sits and practises, and where she's happier than anywhere else in the house, because my lady wants it for a boudoir, or something, where she can show off her 'superiority,' I suppose."

"Of course," said Maude, "Mrs. Creswell has a perfect right to——"

"Oh, bother!" said Gertrude; "of course it's perfectly disgusting! Don't you think so, Mr. Benthall?"

"That's a home question," said Mr. Benthall, with a laugh; "but it is scarcely in good taste of Mrs. Creswell so soon to——"

"I should think not, indeed!" interrupted Gertrude. "Oh, I see plainly what it will be. We shall lead nice lives with that awful woman!"

"I don't think you'll find, as I've told you before, that that 'awful woman,' as you call her, will trouble herself with our companionship for long," said Maude; "and I

cannot say that when she once comes into the house as mistress I should feel the least desire to remain here."

"And she'll do anything with poor uncle," said Gertrude; "he dotes on her."

"Naturally," said Mr. Benthall; "and she is very much attached to him?"

This question was rather addressed to Maude, and she answered it by saying quietly, "I suppose so."

"Oh, nonsense, Maude!" said Gertrude; "uncle's an old dear—kindest, nicest old thing in the world, but not for a girl to like in—well, in that sort of way, don't you know! Not the sort of man to be a girl's first love, I mean!"

"Are you sure that your uncle is Miss Ashurst's first love?"

"We never heard of any other. What is it, George—Mr. Benthall, I mean? You've found out something! Oh, do tell us!"

"Did you know anything of a Mr. Joyce, who was one of Mr. Ashurst's masters?"

"Certainly—a small, slim, good-looking young man," said Maude.

"Good looking, eh?" said Mr. Benthall.

"Should not you say so, Gertrude?"

"Well, I don't know," said Gertrude; "he was too short, I think, and too dark. I like a—I mean——" And Gertrude broke down, and flew the flag of distress in her face again.

"What of Mr. Joyce, in connection with the subject on which we were talking, Mr. Benthall?" asked Maude.

And then Mr. Benthall told them all he had heard from Mrs. Covey.

Gertrude went alone with Mr. Benthall to the gate, and they were a very long time saying their adieux. When she came back to the house, she found her sister in the hall.

"You found the gate very difficult to open, Gerty!" said Maude, with her grave smile.

"Yes, dear, very difficult! Do you know, dear,—he hasn't said anything, but I think Mr. Benthall is going to ask me to be his wife!"

"Well, Gerty, and what then?"

"Then I shall have a home to offer you, my darling! a home where we can be together, and needn't be under the rule of that beautiful, superior creature!"

CHAPTER XXV.

CLOUDING OVER.

GERTRUDE CRESWELL was not wrong in her supposition that Mr. Benthall intended asking her to become his wife. It is not often that mistakes are made in such matters, despite all we read of disappointed maidens and blighted hopes. Life is so very practical in this portion of the nineteenth century, that, except in very rare cases, even love-affairs scarcely care to avail themselves of a halo of romance, of that veil of mystery and secrecy which used to be half the charm of the affair. "The bashful virgin's sidelong looks of love" are now never seen, in anything like good society, where the intention of two young persons to marry as soon as—sometimes before—they have met, and the "understanding" between them is fully recognised by all their friends; while as to the "matron's glance which would such looks reprove," it is entirely obsolete, and never brought into play, save when the bashful virgins bend their sidelong looks of love on good-looking young paupers in the government offices or the army—a proceeding which it is but fair to say the bashful virgins "of the period" very rarely indulge in. *Gertrude* Creswell was as unlike a "girl of the period," in

the present delightful acceptation of that phrase, as can well be imagined; that is to say, she was modest, frank, simple, honest, and without guile; but she was a woman, and she knew perfectly that she had engaged George Benthall's attention, and become the object of his affection, although she had had no previous experience in the matter. They had lived such quiet lives, these young ladies, and had slid so tranquilly from the frilled-trouser-wearing and *les-graces*-playing period of childhood, to the long skirts, croquet, and flirtation of marriageable age, that they had hardly thought of that largest component part of a girl's day-dream, settling in life. There was with them no trace of that direct and unmistakable line of demarcation known as "coming out"—that mountain-ridge between the cold dreary Switzerland of lessons, governesses, midday dinner, back-board, piano practice, and early bed, and the lovely glowing Italy of balls, bouquets, cavaliers, croquet, Park, Row, crush-room, country-house, French novel, and cotillon at five a.m. So Gertrude had never had a love-affair of any kind before; but she was very quiet about it, and restrained her natural tendency to gush, principally for Maude's sake. She thought it might seem unkind in her to make a fuss, as she described it, about her having a lover before Maude, who was as yet unsuited with that commodity. It puzzled Gertrude immensely, this fact of her having proved attractive to any one while Maude was by; she was accustomed to think so much of her elder sister, on whom she had endeavoured to model herself to the best of her ability, that she could not understand any one taking notice of her while her sister was present. Throughout her life, with her father, with her mother, and now with her uncle, Gertrude Creswell had always played the inferior part to her sister; she was always the humble confidante in white muslin to Maude in Tilburina's white satin, and in looks, manner, ability, or disposition, was not imagined to be able to stand any comparison with the elder girl.

But Mr. Benthall, preferring Gertrude, had given long and serious thought as to his future. He had taken the trouble to do something which he knew he ought to have done long since, but which he had always resolutely shirked—to look into the actual condition of his school, and more especially of his boarders; and after careful examination, he confessed to himself, as he smoked a costly cigar, pacing slowly up and down the lane, which was ablaze with apple-blossom—it would never have done to have been caught in the wildly dissipated act of smoking by any of the boys, or, indeed, by a good many of the villagers—he confessed to himself that he wanted a companion, and his establishment wanted a head, and that Mrs. Covey, excellent in her way, was scarcely a proper representative of the female element in the household of the head-master of Helmingham school. Thus minded, Mr. Benthall rode over to Woolgreaves, was received by a benevolent grin from the stable-helper, to whom he confided his horse (confound those fellows, with what an extraordinary facility they blunder on to the right scent in these matters!), went into the house, paid his suit to the two young ladies, had but a few words with Miss Maude, whose services, in consequence of an unfavourable turn of Mrs. Ashurst's illness, were required upstairs, and a prolonged interview of a very satisfactory kind with Miss Gertrude. With a portion only of this interview have we to do; the remaining portion can be much "more easily imagined than described," at least, by those to whom the circumstances of the position have been, or actually are, familiar—perhaps no inconsiderable proportion of the world.

"By the way," said Mr. Benthall, as, after a third ridiculous attempt at pretending he was going, he had again settled himself in his chair, but had not thought it necessary to give up Miss Gertrude's hand, which he had taken in his own when he had last risen to say adieu—"by *the* way, Miss—well, Gertrude—what was that you were *saying* last time I was here about Mrs. Cresswell?"

"What I was saying about Mrs. Creswell? I don't exactly know, but it wouldn't be very difficult to guess! I hate her!" said Gertrude roundly.

"Ah, yes!" said Mr. Benthall, "I think I managed to gather that from the general tone of your conversation; but what were you saying specifically?"

"I don't know what specifically means, I think!" said Gertrude, after a moment's reflection; "but I do know why I hate her!"

"And that is because——"

"Because she pretends to be so awfully superior, and goes in to be so horribly good and demure, and all that kind of thing," said Miss Gertrude, growing very becomingly red with excitement. "She always reminds me of the publican in the parable, who, 'standing afar off'—you know what I mean! I always thought that the publican went in to draw more attention to himself by his mock humility than all the noise and outcry which the Pharisee made, and which any one would have put down to what it was worth; and that's just like Miss A.—I mean Mrs. Creswell—I'm sure I shall call her Miss A. to my dying day, Maude and I are so accustomed to speak of her like that—you'd think butter wouldn't melt in her mouth; and this is so shocking, and that is so dreadful, and she is so prim, and so innocent, and so self-sacrificing; and then she steps in and carries off our uncle, for whom all the unmarried girls in the county were angling years ago, and had given up the attempt in despair!"

"But you must have seen all this in her for months, ever since she has been in the same house with you. And yet it is only since she achieved her conquest of your uncle that you've been so bitter against her."

"Not at all, George. That's so like a man, always to try and say an unpleasant thing about the want of generosity, and all that. Not at all! I don't mind so much about her marrying uncle; if he's such a silly old thing as to like to marry her, that's his look-out, and not ours. And I've no doubt she'll make him what people call

a good wife, awfully respectable, and all that kind of thing. And I don't believe she's ever been in love with anybody else, notwithstanding your stories about that Mr. Joyce. I like your talking about women's gossip, sir; a fine story that was you brought us, and all started by some old woman, wasn't it? But what annoyed me worst was the way in which she wrote about making Maude give up her music-room. I call that regularly cruel, because she knew well enough that Maude was awfully fond of that room, and—and that's what makes me hate her!"

"And Maude seemed to think that that was to be but the beginning of a series of unpleasant measures."

"Well, you know Maude's blood is regularly up in this matter, and of course she is prejudiced to a certain extent, and I don't know—I'm not clever, you know, like she is—how far she's right. But I think plainly enough that Miss A.—I mean Mrs. Creswell—intends to have her own way in everything; and as she doesn't like us, and never did, she'll set much against us, and goodness knows the result!"

Mr. Benthall could not have been described as "goodness," nor was he a particularly far-seeing man, but he thought he knew the result. As he cantered slowly home that afternoon, he thought the matter out, and came to the conclusion that if Mrs. Creswell were the woman she was described, she would tolerate but for a very little time the presence of two persons so obnoxious in the same house with her, and that when that climax arrived, it was the time for the Rev. George Benthall to step in and do himself and everybody else concerned a good turn by taking Gertrude off her uncle's hands.

There was very little doubt that the shelter of the Woolgreaves roof and the luxuries of the Woolgreaves establishment would be required by one of its inmates for but a very short time. Mrs. Ashurst's strength, which had been gradually declining, began to fail her altogether, and it was evident to all that the end was at 'hand. Dr. Osborne, who was in constant attendance—and the little

man never showed to such advantage as under the most trying professional circumstances—shook his head sadly, and confessed that it had now become a question of days. But the old lady was so tranquil, and apparently so happy, that he hesitated to summon her daughter, more especially as the newly married couple were so soon expected home. The girl who attended on the old lady in the capacity of night-nurse had a different experience from Dr. Osborne so far as the tranquillity of the patient was concerned. She knew when she was awake—and considering that she was a full-blooded, heavy, bacon-fed lass, she really deserved much credit for the manner in which she propped her eyelids up with her forefingers, and resorted to sniffing instead of snoring—she knew that Mrs. Ashurst had very disturbed nights, when she lay moaning and groaning and plucking at the bedclothes, and constantly murmuring one phrase: "For my sake! Lord help her! God grant it may turn out right! She did it, I know, for my sake!" Gradually she lost consciousness, and in her wandering state she repeated nothing but this one phrase, "For my sake!" Occasionally she would smile placidly, and look round the room as though in admiration of its comfort and appointments, but then the sad look would come over her face, and she would repeat the melancholy sentence in the saddest of tones. Dr. Osborne, when he eventually came to hear of this, and to witness it, confessed he could not understand it. It was not a case for the College of Surgeons, nor getatable by the Pharmacopœia; it was what Shakespeare said—he'd heard his girl read it—about not being able to minister to a mind diseased, or something of that sort; and yet, God bless him, Mrs. Ashurst was about the last woman to have anything of the kind. However, he should be deuced glad when little Marian—ah, mustn't call her little Marian now; beg pardon, Mrs. Creswell—funny, wasn't it? couldn't get that into his head! had known 'em all so long, and never thought—nor anybody else, for the matter of that. However, that's neither here

nor there. What's that proverb, eh?—"There's no fool like an——" No, no, mustn't say that before him, please. What was he saying? Oh, he should be glad when Mrs. Creswell came home, and took her mother under her own charge.

Mr. and Mrs. Creswell came home two days before they were expected, or rather before they had originally intended. Marian had heard of her mother's illness, and expressed a wish to go to her at once—a wish which of course decided Mr. Creswell's course of action. The tenants and villagers, to whom the news of Mr. Creswell's intended political experiment had been imparted during his absence, had intended to give him a welcome in which they could express their sentiments on flags and mottoes and triumphal arches; and they had already arranged an alliterative sentence, in which "Creswell and Conservatism!" each picked out with gigantic capital letters, were to play conspicuous parts; but Dr. Osborne, who got wind of what was threatened, drove off to Brocksopp in his little pony-chaise, and there took Mr. Teesdale, the agent, into confidence, and revealed to him the real state—hovering between life and death—in which Mrs. Ashurst then lay. On the reception of this information, Mr. Teesdale took upon himself to hint that the intended demonstration had better be postponed for a more convenient season; and accordingly Mr. and Mrs. Creswell, arriving by the train at Brocksopp, and having their carriage to meet them, drove through the streets when the working-people were all engaged at their factories and mills, and made their way home, scarcely exciting any recognition.

The two girls, on the alert at hearing the wheels of the approaching carriage, rushed to the door, and were honoured by being permitted to kiss the cheek of the bride, as she swept past them. No sooner had they kissed their uncle, and were all assembled in the drawing-room, than Marian asked after her mother.

"*I'm* afraid you will find her very much changed,

Mrs. Creswell," said Maude, who, of course, was spokeswoman. "Mrs. Ashurst is very much weaker, and has—has occasional fits of wandering, which——"

"Why was I not informed of this?" asked Marian, in her chilliest tones. "Were you both so much engaged, that you could not manage to let me have a line to tell me of this change in my mother's state?"

"Maude wanted to write and tell you, but Dr. Osborne wouldn't let her," blustered out Gertrude. "She never will say anything for herself, but I'm sure she has been most attentive, Maude has, and I don't think——"

"I'm sorry to interrupt this *lobgesang*, Gertrude; but I must go up and see my mother at once. Be good enough to open the door." "And she sailed out of the room," Gertrude said, afterwards, "as though she'd been a duchess! In one of those rustling silks, don't you know, as stiff as a board, which look as if they'd stand up by themselves!"

When Marian reached her mother's door, and was just about entering, she stopped short, arrested by a low dull moaning sound which fell upon her ear. She listened with her blood curdling within her and her lips growing cold and rigid. Still it came, that low hollow moan, monotonous, dreadful. Then she opened the door, and, passing swiftly in, saw her mother lying tossing on the bed, plucking furtively at the bedclothes, and moaning as she moved her head wearily in its unrest.

"Mother!" cried Marian—"mother, darling mother! don't you know me?" And she flung herself on the bed, and, taking the old woman's head in her arms, softly kissed her lips.

The bright, the momentarily bright, eyes looked at her without seeing her—she knew that—and presently moved away again round the room, as Mrs. Ashurst raised her long lean hand, and, pointing to the wall, said, "Pictures—and books—all fine—all fine!—for my sake!" uttering the last words in a deep hissing whisper.

Marian was too shocked to speak. Shocked, not

frightened; she had much natural strength of mind, and had had experience of illness, though not of this character. But she was shocked to see her mother in such a state, and deeply enraged at the fact that the increase of the illness had been kept from her. "Don't you know me?" she repeated; "mother, darling mother, don't you know me? Marian, poor Marian! your daughter Marian!"

"Ah, don't blame her!" said the old woman, in the same whisper. "Poor Marian! poor dear Marian! my Jimmy's pet! She did it for my sake, all for my sake! Carriages and horses and wine for me—wine, rich strong wine for me—all for me, all for my sake, poor Marian! all for my sake!"

"Is she often in this way? Does she often repeat those horrible words?" asked Marian of the servant, of whose presence she then, on raising her head, became for the first time aware.

"Oh yes, miss—I mean, mum!—constantly, mum! She never says anything else, mum, but about some things being for her sake, mum. And she haven't said anything else, miss, since she was off her head—I mean, since she was delirrous, mum!"

"Does she always mention my name—Marian?"

"Always, mum, 'Poor Marian'—savin' your presence, and not meanin' a liberty—is what she do say, miss, and always about 'for her sake' it's done, whatever it is, which I don't know."

"How long has she been like this? How long have you been with her?"

"A week last Wednesday, mum, was when I was brought from the laundry to be nurse; and if you find your collars and cuffs iron-moulded, mum, or not properly got up, you'll understand it's not me, Dr. Osbin having had me fetched here as bein' strong for nussin' and a good sitter-up o' nights——"

"Yes, I understand!" said Marian, vacantly; "you won't have to sit up any more; I shall relieve you of that. *Just wait* here; I shall be back in a few minutes."

Marian hurried downstairs, and in the drawing-room found her husband, the two girls, and Dr. Osborne, who had joined the party. There must have been some peculiar expression in her face, for she had no sooner opened the door than Mr. Creswell, looking up, hurried across the room and took her hand, saying anxiously, "What is the matter, Marian? what is it, my love?"

"Simply that I arrive here to find my mother wandering and imbecile—she whom I left comparatively cheerful, and certainly in the possession of all her senses—that is all, nothing more," said Marian, in a hard low voice, and with a dead-white face and dried bloodless lips. "I thought," she continued, turning to the girls, "that I might have left her safely in your charge. I never asked for your sympathy, God knows; I would not have had it if you had offered it to me; but I thought you seemed to be disposed kindly and affectionately towards her. There was so much gush and display in your attachment, I might have known it had no real foundation."

"You have no right to speak to us in this way, Mrs. Creswell!" cried Maude, making a step in advance and standing very stiff and erect; "you have no right to——"

"Maude," broke in Mr. Creswell, in his coldest tone, "recollect to whom you are speaking, if you please."

"I do recollect, uncle; I am speaking to Mrs. Ashurst's daughter—dear Mrs. Ashurst, whom both Gertrude and I love, and have tried to show we love her, as she would tell you, if she could, poor darling! And it is only because Mrs. Creswell is her daughter that I answer her at all, after her speaking to me in that way. I will tell you now, Mrs. Creswell, what I should not otherwise have mentioned, that Gerty and I have been constant in our attendance on Mrs. Ashurst, and that one or other of us has always slept in the next room, to be within call if we were wanted, and——"

"Why did you take upon yourselves to keep me in ignorance of the change in my mother's mental state, of

this fearful wandering and unconsciousness?—that is what I complain of."

"Oh, I must not let them say they took it upon themselves at all," said Dr. Osborne, who had been looking on uncomfortably during this dialogue; "that was my fault entirely; the girls wanted to send for you, but I said no, much better not. I knew you were due home in a few days, and your earlier arrival could not have done the least good to my poor old friend upstairs, and would only have been distressing to you."

"Oh, you accept the responsibility, Dr. Osborne?" said Marian, still in the same hard voice. "Would you have acted in the same way with any ordinary patient, any stranger?"

"Eh?" exclaimed the little doctor, in a very loud key, rubbing his face hard with his pocket-handkerchief. "What do you ask, Marian?—any stranger?"

"Would you have taken upon yourself to keep a daughter from her mother under similar circumstances, supposing they had been strangers to you?"

"No—no, perhaps not," said the little doctor, still wildly astonished.

"It will be perhaps better, then, if henceforth you put us on the footing of strangers!" said Marian.

"Marian!" exclaimed Mr. Creswell.

"I mean what I said," she replied. "Had we been on that footing now, I should have been at my mother's bedside some days since!" And she walked quickly from the room.

Dr. Osborne made two steps towards his hat, seized it, clapped it on his head, and with remarkably unsteady legs was making his way to the door, when Mr. Creswell took him by the arm, begged him not to think of what had just passed, but to remember the shock which Marian had received, the suddenness with which this new phase of her mother's illness had come upon her, etc. The little doctor *did not* leave the room, as apparently he had intended at *first;* he sat down on a chair close by, muttering—

"Treat her as a stranger! rocked her on my knee! brought her through measles! father died in my arms! treat her as a stranger!"

Two days afterwards Marian stood by the bed on which lay Mrs. Ashurst, dead. As she reverently arranged the gray hair under the close cap, and kissed the cold lips, she said—

"You did not enjoy the money very long, darling mother! But you died in comfort, at any rate! and that was worth the sacrifice—if sacrifice it were!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN HARNESS.

It was the autumn of the year, in the spring of which Walter Joyce had returned to London from Westhope. Six months had elapsed since he had read what he had almost imagined to be his death-warrant in Marian's reply to his letter containing the Berlin proposal. It was not his death-warrant; he had survived the shock, and, indeed, had borne the disappointment in a way that he did not think possible when the blow first fell upon him. Under the blessed, soothing influence of time, under the perhaps more effectual influence of active employment, his mind had been weaned from dwelling on that dread blank which, as he at first imagined, was to have been his sole outlook for the future. He was young, and strong, and impressionable; he returned to London inclined to be misanthropical and morose, disposed to believe in the breaking of hearts and the crushing of hopes, and the rather pleasant sensations of despair. But after a very short sojourn in the metropolis, he was compelled to avow to himself the wisdom of Lady Caroline Mansergh's prognos-

tications concerning him, and the absolute truth of everything she had said. A life of moping, of indulgence in preposterous cynicism and self-compassion, was not for him; he was meant for far better things—action in the present, distinction in the future—those were to be his aims, and after a fortnight's indolence and moodiness, he had flung himself into the work that was awaiting him, and begun to labour at it with all his energy and all his brain-power.

Some little time afterwards, when Joyce thought over his mental condition in those first days of his return to London, the cheap cynicism, the pettishness, and the languor which he had suffered to possess him, he wondered why old Jack Byrne, with whom he had taken up his quarters, had not rebuked him for it, and one day, with some considerable confusion, he asked the old man the reason.

"Why didn't I speak to you about it, and pitch into you for it, my boy?" said the old man, with his peculiar soft laugh. "Because it's best to let some things have their run, and come to a stop of their own accord. I saw plainly enough what would be the result of that love business, long ago, when you first told me of it. Why didn't I say so then? Why, you don't imagine I should have attempted to influence you in such a matter, when I had never even seen the lady, and had only general experience to take as my guide? I did give you as many hints as I thought prudent or decent in a letter which I wrote to you, my lad; but you didn't seem to profit by them much, or, indeed, to take any heed of them. You went sailing away straight and smoothly enough until that squall came down upon you and carried away your masts and your rigging, and left you a helpless log tossing on the waters. It was so nice to be a helpless log, wasn't it?—so nice that you thought you would never be anything else. But, God bless you, I knew differently; I'd seen the same case a hundred times before, and I knew *if you* were left alone you would come all right in time.

And now you have come all right, and you're doing your work well, and they think highly of you at the *Comet* office."

"I'm glad of that; that's the best news you could give me. Do they think well of me? Do they think I do my work well, and——"

"Good Lord, what a swallow the lad has for flummery!" grumbled old Byrne. "He'd like me to repeat every word of praise to him. It's wonderful to see how he glows under it—no, not wonderful, when one recollects how young he is. Ah, youth, youth! Do they? Yes, of course they do; you know that well enough. It's deuced lucky you gave up that notion of going to Berlin, Walter, boy."

"Yes," said Joyce, with a sigh, as he remembered all about the proposal; "I'm better here."

"Better here, I should think you were, indeed! A correspondent can't do much in the way of making his mark. He can be serious and well informed, or chatty and nonsensical; he can elect between describing the councils of cabinets or the circumference of crinolines; but in either case his scope is limited, and he can never get much fame for himself. Now in your present position as an essayist and leader-writer of remarkable ability—oh, you needn't pretend to blush, you know I shouldn't say what I didn't think—there is possibly a very bright future in store for you! And to think that years ago you possessed a distaste for politics!"

"It does seem ridiculous," said Walter, smiling. "I am always amused when I remember my very wilful ignorance on such matters. However, the credit of the conversion, if credit there be, is entirely owing to you and O'Connor."

"Not entirely, I'm thinking," said the old man. "I recollect your telling me of a conversation you had with Lady Caroline Mansergh, in which certain hopes were expressed and certain suggestions made, which, I should say, had their effect in influencing your conduct. Am I

right, Walter?" And Mr. Byrne looked hard and keenly from under his bushy eyebrows at his young friend.

"Perfectly right!" said Walter, meeting his glance. "I think that the remembrance of Lady Caroline's advice, and the knowledge that she thought I had within me the power of distinguishing myself, were the first inducements to me to shake off that horrible lethargic state into which I had fallen!"

"Well, we must take care that you fulfil all her ladyship's expectations, Walter! What you are doing now must merely be a stepping-stone to something much better. I don't intend to die until I have seen you a leader in the people's cause, my boy! Oh yes, I allow you're soundly with them now, and fight their battles well and effectively with the pen; but I want to live to see you in Parliament, to hear you riddling the plutocrats with your banter, and overwhelming the aristocrats with your scorn!"

"My dear old friend, I fear you pitch the note a little too high," said Joyce, with a laugh. "I don't think you will ever see me among the senators."

"And why not?" asked old Byrne, in a very excited manner—"and why not, pray? Is there any one speaks better at the Club? Is there any one more popular among the leaders of the cause, or with them? If those miserable Tories had not swallowed the leek fifty times in succession, as they have just done, and thereby succeeded in clinging to office for yet a few months, the chiefs of the party, or at least of one section of it—the 'ultras,' as they are good enough to call us—would have relied greatly on your advice and assistance, and when the election comes, as come it must within a very short time, you will see how you will be in requisition. And about your position, Walter? I think we should look to that at once. I think you should lose no time in entering yourself at some Inn of Court, and commence reading for the bar!"

"Don't ask me to make any change in my life at *present*, old friend!" said Walter. "No!" as he saw the *old man* with an impatient gesture about to speak—"no,

I was not going to plead the want of the money; for, in the first place, I know you would lend it to me, and in the second I am myself making, as you know, an excellent income. But I don't want to undertake anything more just now than what I am actually engaged in. I am quite sufficiently occupied—and I am very happy."

Old Byrne was compelled to be satisfied with this declaration, but he grumbled out that it should only be temporary, and that he intended to see Walter in a very different position before he died.

Walter Joyce said nothing more than the truth when he said that he was very happy. He had fallen into exactly the kind of life which suited him, the pursuance of a congenial occupation amongst companions of similar tastes. There are, I take it, but few of us professional plyers of the pen who do not look back with regret and with something akin to wonder to that halcyon time when we first entered upon authorship; when the mere act of writing was in itself pleasant, when the sight of a proof-sheet was calculated to fill one with infinite delight, when one glowed with delight at praise, or writhed in agony under attack. In after life, when the novelty has entirely worn off, when the Pegasus which ambled, and kicked, and pranced, has settled down into the serviceable hack of ordinary use, often obliged, like other hacks, to go through his work and to put forth his paces at inopportune times and seasons, it seems impossible to believe that this freshness of feeling, this extraordinary enthusiasm, can ever have existed; unless, perchance, you see the reflex of yourself in some one else who is beginning to pursue the sunny verdant end of that path which with you at present has worn down into a very commonplace beaten track, and then you perceive that the illusion was not specially your own, but is common to all who are in that happy glorious season of youth.

Walter Joyce was thoroughly happy. He had pleasant rooms in Staples Inn—a quiet, quaint, old-world place, where the houses with their overhanging eaves and gabled

roofs and mullioned windows recall memories of Continental cities and college "quads," and yet are only just shut off from the never-ceasing bustle and riot of Holborn. The furniture of these rooms was not very new, and there was not very much of it; but the sitting-room boasted not merely of two big easy-chairs, but of several rows of bookshelves, which had been well filled, by Jack Byrne's generosity, with books which the old man had himself selected; and in the bedroom there was a bed and a bath, which, in Joyce's opinion, satisfied all reasonable expectations. Here, in the morning, he read or wrote; for he was extending his connection with literature, and found a ready market for his writings in several of the more thoughtful periodicals of the day. In the afternoon he would go down to the *Comet* office, and take part in the daily conference of the principal members of the staff. There present would be Mr. Warren, the proprietor of the paper, who did not understand much about journalism, as, indeed, could scarcely be expected of him, seeing that the whole of his previous life had been taken up in attending to the export provision trade, in which he had made his fortune, but who was a capital man of business, looked after the financial affairs of the concern, and limited his interference with the conduct of the paper in listening to what others had to say. There would be Mr. Saltwell, who devoted himself to foreign politics, who was a wonderful linguist, and a skilful theological controversialist, and who, in his tight drab trousers, cut-away coat, and bird's-eye cravat, looked like a racing trainer or a tout; Mr. Gowan, a Scotchman, a veteran journalist of enormous experience, who, as he used to say, had had scores of papers "killed under him;" Mr. Forrest, a slashing writer, but always in extremes, and who was always put on to any subject which it was required should be highly lauded or shamefully abused—it did not matter much to Mr. Forrest, who was a man of the world; and Mr. Ledingham, a man of great learning but very ponderous in style and recondite *in subject*, whose articles were described by Mr. Shimmer

as being "like roast pig, very nice occasionally, but not to be indulged in often with impunity," were also usual attendants at the conference, which was presided over by the recognised editor of the *Comet*, Terence O'Connor.

Mr. O'Connor was the type of a class of journalists which yet exists, indeed, but is not nearly so numerous as it was a few years ago. Your newspaper editor of to-day dines with the duke and looks in at the countess's reception; his own reporter includes him amongst the distinguished company which he, the reporter, "observes" at select reunions; he rides in the Park, and drives down to his office from the House of Commons, where he has been the centre of an admiring circle of members, in his brougham. Shades of the great men of bygone days—of White and Berry, of Kew and Captain Shandon—think of that! Terence O'Connor was of the old school. He had made journalism his profession since he left Trinity, and had only won his position by hard labour and untiring perseverance, had written in and edited various provincial newspapers, had served his time as sub and hack on the London press, and had eventually risen to the editorial chair which he filled so admirably. A man of vast learning, with the simplicity of a child, of keen common sense tempered with great amicability, an admirable writer, an ardent politician, wielding great power with never-failing impartiality, Terence O'Connor passed his life in a world in which he was exceptionally influential, and to which he was comparatively unknown. His neighbours at Clapham had no idea that the slim gray-haired gentleman whom they saw pottering about in his garden on summer afternoons, or lying on the grass under the shade of a big tree playing with his children, was the lightning-compeller and the thunder-creator of the *Comet*. Though most earnest while engaged in his work, it was his greatest delight to leave every trace of it behind him at his office, and to be entirely free from its influence when at home with his wife and children. Occasionally, of course, the few old friends who dined with him would start a political

or literary discussion, in which he would bear his part; but he was never happy until the conversation found its way back into the ordinary social channels, or until a demand was made for music, of which he was passionately fond. It was a lucky thing for Walter Joyce to make the acquaintance and to win the regard of such a man as Terence O'Connor, who had a wonderfully quick eye for character, and who, having noticed Walter's readiness of appreciation and bright incisive style in the few articles which he wrote on the occasion of his first introduction by Mr. Byrne, suggested that the post at Berlin should be offered to him. The more they were thrown together the better they liked each other. Walter had the greatest admiration for O'Connor's talent and power of work; while the elder man looked kindly on his young friend's eagerness and enthusiasm, his desire for distinction, and his delight at laudation, perhaps as somewhat reflecting his own feelings before he had become settled down to the mill-horse grind—ah, how many years ago!

After the conference had broken up, Joyce, to whom, perhaps, a subject had been given to treat, would go back to his chambers and work at it for two or three hours, or he would remain at the office discussing the matter in detail with Terence O'Connor, and taking his friend's advice as to the manner of treatment. Or, if he were free, he would lounge in the Park, and stare at the equipages, and the toilettes, and the London panorama of luxury there constantly going by, all new to the country-bred young man, to whom, until he went to Lord Hetherington's, the old rumbling chariot of Sir Thomas Churchill, with its worsted-epauletted coachman and footman, was a miracle of comfort and a triumph of taste. Or he would ramble out with Shimmer, or Forrest, or some other of his colleagues, to the suburbs, over the breezy heights of Hampstead, or through the green Willesden lanes, and get the city dust and smoke blown out of them. When he was not on duty at the office at *night*, Walter would sometimes take the newspaper admis-

sion and visit the theatre; but he had little taste for the drama, or rather, perhaps, for such dramatic representations as were then in vogue, and it pleased him much more to attend the meetings of the Forum, a club constituted for the purpose of discussing the principal political and social questions of the day, and composed of young barristers and newspaper writers, with a sprinkling of public-office men, who met in the large room of a tavern situated in one of the quiet streets leading from Fleet Street to the river. The leaders of the different political parties, and others whose deeds or works had given them celebrity or notoriety, were happy in their ignorance of the existence of the Forum, or they must have been rendered uncomfortable by finding themselves the objects of so much wild denunciation. The members of the Forum were not in the habit of concealing their opinions, or of moderating the language in which those opinions were expressed; and the debate in which the then holders of office were not denounced as effete and useless nincompoops, bound by degrading ties of subserviency to a policy which, while originally dangerous, was now degrading, or in which the leaders of the Opposition were not stigmatised as base-bred ruffians, linked together by the common bond of ignorance with the common hope of rapine—was considered dull and spiritless indeed. As Mr. Byrne had intimated, Walter Joyce was one of the most prominent members of this debating club; he had a clear resonant voice, capable of excellent modulation, and spoke with fluency. His speeches, which were tinged with a far more pronounced radicalism—the effect of the teaching of Jack Byrne—than had previously been promulgated at the meetings of the Forum, soon became widely talked of among the members and their friends, and Walter's rising was eagerly looked forward to, and warmly hailed, not merely for the novelty of his doctrine, but for the boldness and the humour with which he sought to inculcate it. His success was so great that the heads of the Tory party in the club became alarmed,

and thought it necessary to send off for Alister Portcullis, who was formerly the great speaker on their side, but who had recently become editor of a provincial paper, to return to town, and oppose Joyce on one or two special subjects of discussion. Portcullis came up to London, and the encounter took place before a room crowded to the ceiling (it was rumoured—and believed by some—that the Premier and the leader of the Opposition were present, with wigs drawn over their eyes and comforters over their noses), and re-echoing to the cheers of the partisans. Walter was understood to have held his own, and, indeed, to have had the best of it; but Portcullis made a very good speech, covering his opponent with sarcasm and invective, and declaiming against the cause which he represented with a whirlwind of fury which greatly incensed old Jack Byrne, who happened to be sitting immediately beneath him.

Political feeling ran very high just at that time, and the result of the forthcoming election was looked forward to with the greatest confidence by the Radicals. The organisation of the party was very complete. A central committee, of which Mr. Byrne and Terence O'Connor were members, had its sittings in London, and was in daily communication with the various local committees of the principal provincial towns, and most of the intending candidates had been despatched to make a tour of the neighbourhood which they proposed to represent, with the view of ascertaining the feelings of the electors, and ingratiating themselves with them.

Among these touring candidates was young Mr. Bokenham, who aspired to represent the constituency of Brocksopp. Young Bokenham had been selected by the central committee principally because his father was a very influential manufacturer, and because he himself, though not specially clever or deeply versed in politics, was recommended as fluent, of good appearance, and eminently docile and leadable. The reports which during and after *his visit* came up from the local to the central committee

by no means bore out the recommendation. The fact was that young Mr. Bokenham, who had at a very early age been sent to Eton, who had been a gentleman commoner of Christchurch, and who had always had his own way and the command of large sums of money to enable him to do as he pleased, had become, as is very often the case under the influence of such surroundings, a perfect type of the parvenu and the plutocrat, and had, if anything, rather an antipathy for that cause of which he was about to offer himself as one of the representatives. To announce this would, however, he was aware, be simply to renounce the very large fortune which would accrue to him at his father's death, and which the old man, who had been a staunch Radical from his earliest days, and who gloried in being a self-made man, would certainly have dispersed through a thousand charitable channels rather than allow one penny of it to be touched by his politically renegade son. Moreover, young Bokenham pined for the distinction of parliament membership, which he knew, for the present at least, was only to be obtained by holding to his father's political principles; and so he professed to be in earnest in the matter, and went down to Brocksopp and called on the principal people of the place, and convened a few meetings and delivered a few speeches. But the Brocksopp folk were very badly impressed. They utterly failed to recognise young Tommy Bokenham, as they had always spoken of him among themselves during all the years of his absence, in the bearded, natty-booted, delicately gloved gentleman, who minced his words and used a perfumed handkerchief, and talked about the chah-tah of our lib-ah-ties. His manner was unpleasant and offensive, and his matter was not half sufficiently peppered to suit the tastes of the Brocksopp Radicals, who could not be too frequently reminded that they were the salt of the earth, and that the horny hand of labour was what their intending representative was always wishing to clasp. Young Mr. Bokenham, no longer Tommy after he had once been seen, objected to the horny hand of labour,

disliked the smell of factories, and the manner and appearance of the working-classes altogether. He could not drink much at the public-houses, and the smell of the strong shag tobacco made him ill, and in fact his first tour for canvassing was a woful and egregious failure, and was so reported to the central committee in London by their Brocksopp agents.

On this report the committee met, and had a long and earnest consultation. Brocksopp was an important place, and one which it was most desirable to secure. No other candidate possessing such wealth or such local influence as young Bokenham could be found, and it was therefore imperative that he should be carried through. It was, however, necessary that his mistakes should be pointed out to him, and he should be thoroughly well schooled and advised as to his future proceedings. He was accordingly invited to attend the next meeting of the committee, which he did, and received a three-hours' drilling with great composure. He promised to adopt all the suggestions which were made, and to carry out all the plans which were proposed. Walter Joyce, who happened to be present, was much amused at Mr. Bokenham's great amiability and power of acquiescence, and was about saying so to Mr. Byrne, who was seated next him, when he was startled by hearing the candidate say, in answer to a question from one of the committee as to whether any one was in the field on the Tory side—

"Oh yes; an old gentleman named Creswell, a retired manufacturer of great wealth and position in those parts."

"Is he likely to make a strong fight?"

"Well, ya-as!" drawled young Bokenham. "Old boy's not supposed to care particularly about it himself, don't you know; but he's lately married a young wife—doosid pretty woman, and all that kind of thing—and they say she's set her heart on becoming the mem*beress.*"

"*Do* you hear that?" whispered Byrne to Joyce.

"I do," replied Walter. "This man is a fool; but he must be got in, and Mr. Creswell must be kept out, at all hazards."

And Jack Byrne grinned.

CHAPTER XXVII.

RIDING AT ANCHOR.

THE intention, one of the first which Marian Creswell had expressed after her marriage, and one which had so incensed Gertrude, of converting the girls' music-room into a boudoir, had long since been carried out. Almost immediately after he had returned from his wedding trip, Mr. Creswell had sent to London for decorators and upholsterers. An army of foreign artists, much given to beard and pantomimical gesture, to humming scraps of operas over their work, and to furtively smoking cigarettes in the shrubberies whenever they could evade the stern eye of the overseer, had arrived upon the scene; and when they returned to town they left the music-room, which had been a bleak, gaunt, cheerless apartment enough, a miracle of brightness and cosiness, elegance and comfort. Everybody was astonished at the change, and the young ladies themselves were compelled to confess that the boudoir, as it then appeared, was perfectly charming, and that really, perhaps, after all, Mrs. Creswel might have been actuated, apart from mere malevolence and spite, by some sense and appreciation of the capabilities of the room in the selection she had made. There was a good deal of actual truth in this judgment; Marian had determined to take the earliest opportunity of asserting herself against the girls and letting them know the superiority of her position; she had also intended, if ever she were able, *to gratify* the wish to have a room of her

own, where she might be absolute mistress, surrounded by her books, pictures, and other belongings; and by the acquisition of the music-room she was able to accomplish both these intentions. Moreover, the windows of the music-room looked out towards Helmingham. Half-way towards the dim distance stood the old school-house, where she had been born, where all her childhood had been spent, and where she had been comparatively innocent and unworldly; for though the worship of wealth had probably been innate in her, and had grown with her growth and strengthened with her strength, she had not then sacrificed others to her own avarice, nor forfeited her self-respect for the gratification of her overwhelming passion. In a person differently constituted, the constant contemplation of such views might have had an irritating or a depressing effect, but Marian's strength of mind rendered her independent of any such feeling. She never thought with regret of the step she had taken; she never had the remotest twinge of conscience as to the manner in which she had behaved to Walter Joyce; she was frequently in the habit of passing all the circumstances in review in her mind, and invariably came to the conclusion that she had acted wisely, and that, were she placed in a similar position again, she should do exactly the same. No; she was able to think over all the passages of her first and only love—that love which she had deliberately cast from the pedestal of her heart, and trampled under foot—without an extra pulsation of excitement or regret. She would pass hour after hour in gazing from her window on distant places where, far removed from the chance of intrusion by the prying villagers—who, however, were profoundly ignorant of what was going on—she would have stolen interviews with her lover, listening to his fond words, and experiencing a kind of pleasure such as she had hitherto thought nothing but the acquisition of money could create. Very tranquilly she thought of the bygone time, and looked across the landscape at the well-known places. She had slipped so easily into her present

position, and settled herself so firmly there, that she could scarcely believe there had been a time when she had been poor and dependent, when she had been unable to exercise her every whim and fancy, and when she had been without an elderly gray-haired gentleman in constant attendance upon her, and eager to anticipate her very slightest wish.

One afternoon, about eight months after her mother's death, Marian was sitting at the window of her boudoir, gazing vacantly at the landscape before her. She did not see the trees, erst so glorious in their russet garments, now half-stripped and shivering in the bitter autumnal wind that came booming over the distant hills, and moaned wearily over the plain; she did not see the little stream that lately flashed so merrily in the summer sunlight, but had now become a brown and swollen foaming torrent, roaring where it had softly sung, and bursting over its broad banks instead of coyly slipping through its pebbly shallows; she did not see the birds now skimming over the surface of the ground, now rising, but with no lofty flight, the harbingers of coming storm; she did not see the dun clouds banking up to windward; nor did she note any of the outward characteristics of the scene. She was dull and bored, and it was a relief when she heard the handle of the door turned, and, looking round, saw her husband in the room.

There was nothing of palpable uxoriousness—that most unpleasant of displayed qualities, especially in elderly people—in the manner in which Mr. Creswell advanced and, bending over his wife, took her face in his hands and kissed her cheek; nor in the way in which he sat down beside her and passed his hands over her shining hair; nor in the words of tenderness with which he addressed her. All was relieved by a touch of dignity, by an evidence of earnest sincerity, and the veriest cynic and scoffer at the domesticity and what Charles Lamb called the "behaviour of married people," would have found nothing to ridicule in the undisguised love and admiration of the old man for his young wife, so quietly were they exhibited.

"What made you fly away in that hurry from the library just now, darling?" said he. "You just peeped in, and were off again, never heeding my calling to you to remain."

"I had no notion you were engaged, or that anybody was here!" said Marian.

"I am never engaged when you want me, and there is never anybody here whose business is of equal importance with your pleasure."

"When did you cultivate the art of saying pretty things?" asked Marian, smiling. "Is it a recent acquisition, or one of old standing, which had only rusted from disuse?"

"I never had occasion to try whether I possessed the power until you came to me," said Mr. Creswell, with an old-fashioned bow. "There, oddly enough, I was talking about speaking in public, and the trick of pleasing people by public speaking, to those two men when you looked into the room."

"Indeed. Who were your visitors?"

"I thought you would have recognised old Croke, of Brocksopp; he seemed a little hurt at your running away without speaking to him; but I put him right. The other gentleman has corresponded with you, but never seen you before—Mr. Gould, of London. You wrote to him just after poor Tom's death, you recollect, about that sale."

"I recollect perfectly," said Marian. (She remembered in an instant Joyce's allusion to the man in his first memorable letter.) "But what brought him here at this time? There is no question of the sale now?"

"No, dearest; but Mr. Gould has a very large practice as a parliamentary agent and lawyer, and he has come down here about the election."

"The election? I thought that was all put off!"

"Put off?" repeated Mr. Creswell. "Indefinitely? For ever?"

"I'm sure you told me so."

"*Now*, that is so like a woman! The idea of an

election being quietly put aside in that way! No, child, no; it was postponed merely; it is expected to come off very shortly."

"And what have these two men to do with it?"

"These two men, as you call them, have a great deal to do with it. Mr. Croke is a leading man amongst the Conservative party—that is my party, you understand, child—in Brocksopp, and Mr. Gould is to be my London agent, having Mr. Teesdale, whom you know, as his lieutenant, on the spot."

"You speak of 'my party,' and 'my agent,' as though you had fully made up your mind to go in for the election. Is it so?"

"I had promised to do so," said Mr. Creswell, again with the old-fashioned bow, "before you did me the honour to accept the position which you so worthily fill; and I fear, even had you objected, that I should scarcely have been able to retract. But when I mentioned it to you, you said nothing to lead me to believe that you did object."

"Nor do I in the very smallest degree. On the contrary, I think it most advisable and most important. What are your chances of success?"

"Well, on the whole, good; though it struck me that our friends who have just gone were a little too sanguine, and—at least, so far as Mr. Croke was concerned—a little too much disposed to underrate the strength of the enemy."

"The enemy? Ah!—I forgot. Who is our opponent?" Mr. Creswell heard the change in the pronoun, and was delighted.

"A certain young Mr. Bokenham, son of an old friend and contemporary of mine, who was launched in life about the same time that I was, and seemed to progress step by step with me. I am the younger man by some years, I believe; but," continued the old gentleman, with an odd, half-sheepish look, "it seems curious to find myself running a *tilt with* Tommy Bokenham, who was not born *when I was a grown* man!"

"The position is one with which age has very little to do," said Marian, with a slight hardening of her voice. "No, if anything, I should imagine that a man of experience and knowledge of the world had a better chance than a young and necessarily unformed man, such as Mr. Bokenham. You say that your friends seemed confident?"

"A little too confident. Old Croke is a Tory to the backbone, and will not believe in the possibility of a Liberal being returned for the borough; and Mr. Gould seems to depend very much on the local reports which he has had from men of the Croke stamp, and which are all of the most roseate hue."

"Over-certainty is the almost infallible precursor of failure. And we must not fail in this matter. Don't you think you yourself had better look into it more closely than you have done?"

"My darling one, you give me an interest in the matter which previously it never possessed to me! I will turn my attention to it at once, go into the details as a matter of business, and take care that, if winning is possible, we shall win. No trouble or expense shall be spared about it, child, you may depend; though what has given you this sudden start I cannot imagine. I should have thought that the ambition of being a member's wife was one which had never entered your head."

"My head is always ready to serve as a receptacle for schemes for my husband's advancement, whether they be of my own, or his, or other people's prompting," said Marian, demurely. And the old gentleman bent over her again, and kissed her on the forehead.

What was this sudden interest in these election proceedings on Marian's part, and whence did it arise? Was it mere verbiage, pleasant talk to flatter her husband, showing feigned excitement about his prospects to hide the real carelessness and insouciance which she could not *choose* but feel? Was she tired of his perpetual presence *in waiting* upon her, and did she long to be rid of her

patient slave, untiring both in eye and ear in attention to her wants, almost before they were expressed? There are many women who weary very speedily of suit and service perpetually paid them, who sicken of compliments and attentions, as the pastry-cooks' boys are said to do, after the unrestricted gratification of their tart-appetites, in the early days of their apprenticeship. Did she talk at random with the mere idea of making things pleasant to her husband, and with the knowledge that the mere fact of any expression of interest on her part in any action of his would be more than appreciated? Not one whit. Marian never talked at random, and knew her power sufficiently to be aware that there was no need for the expression of any forced feeling where Mr. Creswell was concerned. The fact was—and it was not the first time she had acknowledged it to herself, though she had never before seen her way clearly to effect any alteration—the fact was that she was bored out of her life. The golden apples of the Hesperides, gained after so much trouble, so much lulling of the dragon of conscience, had a smack of the Dead Sea fruit in them, after all! The money had been obtained, and the position had been compassed, it was true; but what were they? What good had she gathered from the money, beyond the fact of the mere material comforts of house, and dress, and equipage? What was the position, but that of wife of the leading man in the very narrow circle in which she had always lived? She was the centre of the circle, truly; but the circle itself had not enlarged. The elegant carriage, and the champing horses, and the obsequious servants, were gratifying in their way; but there was but little satisfaction in thinking that the sight of her enjoyment of them was confined to Jack Forman, sunning himself at the ale-house door, and vacantly doffing his cap as homage to her as she swept by, or to the villagers amongst whom she had been reared, who ran to their doors as they heard the rumbling of the wheels, and returned to their back parlours, envying her her state, it is true, but congratulating themselves with the recol-

lection of the ultimate fate of Dives in the parable, and assuring each other that the difference of sex would have no material effect on the great result. Dull, cruelly dull, that was all she could make of it, look at it how she would. To people of their social status society in that neighbourhood was infinitely more limited than to those in lower grades. An occasional visit from, and an occasional dinner with, Sir Thomas and Lady Churchill at the Park, or some of the richer and more influential Brocksopp commercial magnates, comprised all their attempts at society. The rector of Helmingham was a studious man, who cared little for heavy dinner-parties, and a proud man, who would accept no hospitality which he could not return in an equal way; and as for Dr. Osborne, he had been remarkably sparing of his visits to Woolgreaves since his passage-of-arms with Mrs. Creswell. When he did call he invariably addressed himself to Mr. Creswell, and did not in the least attempt to conceal that his feelings had been wounded by Marian in a manner which no lapse of time could heal.

No! the fact was there: the money had been gained, but what it had brought was utterly insufficient to Marian's requirements. The evil passion of ambition, which had always been dormant in her, overpowered by the evil passion of avarice, began, now that the cravings of its sister vice were appeased, to clamour aloud and make itself heard. What good to a savage is the possession of the gem of purest ray serene, when by his comrades a bit of glass or tinsel would be equally prized and appreciated? What good was the possession of wealth among the inhabitants of Helmingham and Brocksopp, by whom the Churchills of the Park were held in far greater honour, as being—a statement which, though religiously believed, was utterly devoid of foundation—of the "raal owd stock"? The notion of her husband's election to Parliament gave Marian new hopes and new ideas. Unconsciously throughout her life she had lived upon excitement, and she required it still. In what she had imagined *were* merely humdrum days in the bygone times she had

had her excitement of plotting and scheming how to make both ends meet, and of dreaming of the possible riches; then she had her love affair, and there had flashed into her mind the great idea of her life, the intention of establishing herself as mistress of Woolgreaves. All these things were now played out; the riches had come, the old love was buried beneath them, the position was attained. But the necessity for excitement remained, and there was a chance for gratifying it. Marian was pining for society. What was the use of her being clever, as she had always been considered, if the candle of her talent were always to be hidden under the Brocksopp bushel? She longed to mix with clever people, amongst whom she would be able to hold her own by her natural gifts, and more than her own by her wealth. To be known in the London world, with the entry into it which her husband's position would secure to her, and then to distinguish herself there, that was the new excitement which Marian Creswell craved, and day by day she recurred to the subject of the election, and discussed its details with her husband, delighting him with the interest which she showed in the scheme, and by the shrewd practical common sense which she brought to bear upon it.

Meanwhile the relations existing between Mrs. Creswell and her recently acquired connections, Maude and Gertrude, had not been placed on any more satisfactory footing. They lived together under an armed truce rather than a state of peace, seeing as little of each other as possible, Marian ignoring the girls in every possible way, except when they were perforce brought under her notice, and the girls studiously acting without reference to any supposed wishes or ideas of Mrs. Creswell's. Mr. Creswell followed his wife's lead exactly; he was so entirely wrapped up in her and her doings that he had no eye nor ear for any one else, and he would probably have been very much astonished if he had been told that a complete estrangement had taken place between him and the other members of his family, and would positively have denied

it. Such, however, was the case. The girls, beyond seeing their uncle at meals, were left entirely to their own devices; and it was, under the circumstances, fortunate for their future that their past training had been such as it had been. Gertrude, indeed, was perfectly happy; for although Mr. Benthall had not actually proposed to her, there was a tacit understanding of engagement between them. He occasionally visited at Woolgreaves, and during the summer they had met frequently at various garden-parties in the neighbourhood; and Maude was as quiet and earnest and self-contained as ever, busied in her work, delighting in her music, and, oddly enough, having one thing in common with Mrs. Creswell—an interest in the forthcoming election, of which she had heard from Mr. Benthall, who was a violent politician of the Liberal school.

One day the girls were sitting in the room which had been assigned to them on the establishment of the boudoir, and which was a huge, lofty, and by no means uncomfortable room, rendered additionally bright and cheerful by Gertrude's tasty handiwork and clever arrangement. It was one of those close warm days which come upon us suddenly sometimes, when the autumn has been deepening into winter, and the reign of fires has commenced. The sun had been shining with much of his old summer power, and the girls had been enjoying his warmth, and had let the fire out, and left the door open, and had just suspended their occupations—Maude had been copying music, and Gertrude letter-writing—owing to the want of light, and were chatting previous to the summons of the dressing bell.

"Where is madam this afternoon, Maude?" asked Gertrude, after a little silence.

"Shut up in the library with uncle and Mr. Gould—that man who comes from London about the election. I heard uncle send for her."

"Lor', now, how odd!" said unsophisticated Gertrude; "she seems all of a sudden to have taken great interest in *this* election thing."

"Naturally enough, Gerty," said Maude. "Mrs. Creswell is one of the most ambitious women in the world, and this 'election thing,' as you call it, is to do her more good, and gain her higher position, than she ever dreamed of until she heard of it."

"What a curious girl you are, Maude! How you do think of things! What makes you think that?"

"Think it—I'm sure of it. I've noticed the difference in her manner, and the way in which she has thrown herself into this question more than any other since her marriage, and brought all her brains—and she has plenty—to uncle's help. Poor dear uncle!"

"Ah, poor dear uncle! Do you think madam really cares for him?"

"Cares for him? Yes, as a stepping-stone for herself, as a means to the end she requires."

"Ah, Maude, how dreadful! But you know what I mean; do you think she loves him—you know?"

"My dear Gerty, Marian Ashurst never loved anybody but one, and——"

"Ah, I know who you mean; that man who kept the school—no, not kept the school, was usher to Mr. Ashurst—Mr.—Joyce: that was it. She was fond of him, wasn't she?"

"She was engaged to him, if the report we heard was true; but as to fond of him—the only person Marian Ashurst ever cared for was—Marian Ashurst!—Who's there?"

A figure glided past the open door, dimly seen in the waning light. But there was no response, and Gertrude's remark of "Only one of the servants" was almost drowned in the clanging summons of the dinner-bell.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE OPPORTUNITY.

Mr. Bokenham did not improve in the estimation either of the constituency of Brocksopp, or of those in London who had the guidance of electioneering matters in the borough in the Liberal interest. The aspiring candidate was tolerably amenable at first, went down as often as the policy of such a course was suggested to him, and visited all the people whose names were on the list with which he was supplied; though his objectionable manner, and his evident lack of real interest in the place and its inhabitants, militated very much against his success. But after a little time he neglected even these slight means for cultivating popularity. A young man, with an excellent income, and with the prospect of a very large fortune on his father's death, has very little trouble in getting into such society as would be most congenial to him, more especially when that society is such as is most affected by the classes which he apes. Young Mr. Bokenham, whose chief desire in life was, as his sharp-seeing, keen-witted old father said of him, to "sink the shop," laid himself out especially for the company of men of birth and position, and he succeeded in hooking himself on to one of the fastest and most raffish sets in London. The fact that he was a *novus homo*, and that his father was "in trade," which had caused him to be held up to ridicule at Eton, and had rendered men shy of knowing him at Christchurch, had, he was delighted to perceive, no such effect in the great city. He began with a few acquaintances picked up in public, but he speedily enlarged and improved his connection. The majors, with the billiard-table brevet, the captains, and the shabby old bucks of St. Alban's Place, with whom Tommy Bokenham at first consorted, were soon renounced for men of a widely different

stamp, so far as birth and breeding were concerned, but with much the same tastes, and more means and opportunities of gratifying them. It is probable that Mr. Bokenham owed his introduction among these scions of the upper circles to a notion, prevalent among a certain section of them, that he might be induced to plunge into the mysteries of the turf, and to bet largely, even if he did not undertake a racing establishment. But they were entirely wrong. Young Tommy had not sufficient physical go and pluck in him for anything that required energy; he commanded his position in the set in which, to his great delight, at length he found himself, by giving elaborate dinners and occasionally lending money in moderate amounts, in return for which he was allowed to show himself in public in the company of his noble acquaintances, and was introduced by them to certain of their male and female friends, the latter of whom were especially frank and demonstrative in their reception and welcome of him.

The fascination of this kind of life, which began to dawn on young Mr. Bokenham almost concurrently with the idea of his standing for the borough of Brocksopp, soon proved to be incompatible with the proper discharge of the duties required of him as candidate. He found the necessity for frequent visits to his intended constituents becoming more and more of a nuisance to him, and entirely declined a suggestion which was made to the effect that now, as the time of the election was so near at hand, it would be advisable for him to take up his residence at his father's house, and give his undivided attention to his canvassing. It was pointed out to him that his opponent, Mr. Creswell, was always on the spot, and, quite unexpectedly, had recently shown the greatest interest in the forthcoming struggle, and was availing himself of every means in his power to insure his success; but Tommy Bokenham refused to "bury himself at Brocksopp," as he phrased it, until it was absolutely necessary. "It is positively cruel," wrote Mr. Harrington, a clever young

clerk, who had been despatched by his principals, Messrs. Potter and Fyfe, the great parliamentary agents, to report how matters were progressing in the borough, "to see how Mr. B. is cutting out the running for the other side! I've had a talk with South, the attorney, who is acting for us down here, a shrewd, sensible fellow, and he says there is every hope of our pulling through, even as we are, but that if we had only brought another kind of man to the post, our success would be a moral." Old Mr. Potter, a very rigid old gentleman residing at Clapham, and deacon of a chapel there, growled very much, both over the matter and the manner of this communication.

"What does this young man mean," he asked, peering over the paper at his partner through his double glasses, "by using this turf slang? Bring a man to the 'post!' and a 'moral' indeed!—a word I should not have expected to find in this gentleman's vocabulary." But Mr. Fyfe, who had a sneaking liking for sport, appeased the old gentleman, and pointed out that the letter, though oddly worded, was really full of good and reliable information, and that young Harrington had executed his commission cleverly. Both partners shook their heads over this further account of their candidate's shortcomings, and decided that some immediate steps must be taken to retrieve their position. The time of election was imminent; their opponent was resident, indefatigable, and popular; and though the report from Harrington spoke of ultimate success with almost certainty, it would not do to run the smallest risk in a borough which they had pledged their credit to wrest from Tory domination.

Messrs. Potter and Fyfe were not likely men to ventilate in public any opinions which they may have held regarding the business matters on which they were employed, but the inattention of Mr. Bokenham to his duties, and the manner in which he was throwing away his chances began to be talked of at the *Comet* office, and the news of it even penetrated to Jack Byrne's little club. It was on the day *after he* had first heard of it that the old man walked up

to Joyce's chambers, and on entering found his friend at home, and glad to see him. After a little desultory conversation, old Byrne began to talk of the subject with which he was filled.

"Have you heard anything lately of that man who was going to contest your old quarters, or thereabouts, for us, Walter? What's his name? Bokenham! that's it," he said.

"Oh yes," answered Joyce, "oddly enough, they were talking of him last night at the office. I went into O'Connor's room just as Forrest, who had come down with some not very clearly defined story from the Reform, was suggesting a slashing article with the view of what he called 'rousing to action' this very young man. O'Connor pooh-poohed the notion and put Forrest off; but from what he said to me afterwards, I imagine Mr. Bokenham is scarcely the man for the emergency—a good deal too lukewarm and dilettante. They won't stand that sort of thing in Brocksopp, and it's a point with our party, and especially with me, that Brocksopp should be won."

"Especially with you," repeated the old man; "ay, ay, I mind you saying that before! That's strong reaction from the old feeling, Walter!"

"Strong, but not unnatural, I think. You, to whom I told the story when I first knew you, will remember what my feelings were towards—towards that lady. You will remember how entirely I imagined my life bound up in hers, my happiness centred on all she might say or do. You saw what happened—how she flung me aside at the very first opportunity, with scant ceremony and shallow excuses, careless what effect her treachery might have had upon me."

"It was all for the best, lad, as it turned out."

"As it turned out, yes! But how did she know that, when she did it? Had she known that it would have turned out for the worst, for the very worst, would she have stayed her hand and altered her purpose? Not she."

"I don't like to see you vindictive, boy; recollect she's a woman, and that once you were fond of her."

"I am not vindictive, as I take it; and when I think of her treatment of me, the recollection that I was fond of her is not very likely to have a softening effect. See here, old friend: in cold blood, and with due deliberation, Marian Ashurst extinguished what was then the one light in my sufficiently dreary life. Fortune has given me the chance, I think, of returning the compliment, and I intend to do it."

Jack Byrne turned uneasily in his chair; it was evident that his sentiments were not in accord with those of his friend. After a minute's pause he said, "Even supposing that the old eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth retribution were allowable—which I am by no means disposed to grant, especially where women are concerned—are you quite sure that in adopting it you are getting at what you wish to attain? You have never said so, but it must be as obvious to you as it is to me that Mrs. Creswell does not care for her husband. Do you think, then, she will be particularly influenced by a matter in which his personal vanity is alone involved?"

Joyce smiled somewhat grimly. "My dear old friend, it was Mrs. Creswell's ambition that dealt me what might have been my *coup de grâce*. My anxiety about this contest at Brocksopp springs from my desire to wound Mrs. Creswell's ambition. My knowledge of that lady is sufficient to prove to me, as clearly as though I were in her most sacred confidence, that she is most desirous that her husband should be returned to Parliament. The few words that were dropped by that idiot Bokenham the other day pointed to this, but I should have been sure of it if I had not heard them. After all, it is the natural result, and what might have been expected. During her poverty her prayer was for money. Money acquired, another want takes its place, and so it will be to the end of the chapter."

As Joyce ceased speaking there was a knock at the door, and Jack Byrne opening it, admitted young Mr.

Harrington, the confidential clerk of Messrs. Potter and Fyfe. Young Mr. Harrington was festively attired in a garb of sporting cut, and wore his curved-rimmed hat on the top of his right ear; but there was an unusual, anxious look in his face, and he showed signs of great mental perturbation, not having, as he afterwards allowed to his intimate friends, "been so thoroughly knocked out of time since Magsman went a mucker for the Two Thou'." This perturbation was at once noticed by Mr. Byrne.

"Ah, Mr. Harrington," said he; "glad to see you, sir. Not looking quite so fresh as usual," he added, with a cynical grin. "What's the matter—nothing wrong in the great turf world, I trust? Sister to Saucebox has not turned out a roarer, or Billy Billingsgate broken down badly?"

"Thank you very much for your kind inquiries, Mr. Byrne," said Mr. Harrington, eyeing the old man steadily, without changing a muscle of his face. "I'll not forget to score up one to you, sir, and I'll take care to repay you that little funniment on the first convenient opportunity. Just now I've got something else in hand. Look here, let's stow this gaff! Mr. Joyce, my business is with you. The fact is, there is an awful smash-up at Brocksopp, and my governors want to see you at once."

"At Brocksopp?" said Joyce, with a start. "A smash at Brocksopp?"

"Yes," said Mr. Harrington. "The man that we were all depending on, young Mr. Bokenham, has come to grief."

"Dead?" exclaimed old Byrne.

"Oh no, not at all; political rather than social grief, I should have said. The fact is, so far as we can make out, Lord and Lady Steppe—you know Lady Steppe, Mr. Joyce, or, at all events, your friend Shimmer of the *Comet* could tell you all about her: she was Miss Tentose in the ballet at the Lane—have persuaded our sucking senator to go to Egypt with them for the winter. Lady S.'s

influence is great in that quarter, I understand—so great that he pitches up Brocksopp, and let's us all slide!"

"Given up Brocksopp?" said old Byrne.

"Chucked up his cards, sir," said Harrington, "when the game was in his hand. My governors' people are regularly up a tree, cornered, and all that; so they want to see you, Mr. Joyce, at once, and have sent me to fetch you."

"To fetch him! Potter and Fyfe, of Abingdon Street, have sent you to fetch him!" cried old Byrne, in great excitement. "Walter, do you think—do you recollect what I said to you some time ago? Can it be that it's coming on now?"

Joyce made no verbal reply, but he grasped his old friend's hand warmly, and immediately afterwards started off with Mr. Harrington in the hansom cab which that gentleman had waiting at the door.

The idea that had flashed through old Jack Byrne's mind, preposterously exaggerated as it had at first seemed to him, was nevertheless correct. When Joyce arrived at Messrs. Potter and Fyfe's office, he found there not merely those gentlemen, but with them several of the leading members of the party, and a deputation of two or three Liberals from Brocksopp, with whom Joyce was acquainted. Mr. Moule and Mr. Spalding, nervously excited, stepped forwards and shook hands with the young man in a jerky kind of manner. Immediately afterwards, backing again towards their chairs, on the extremest edge of which they propped themselves, they hid their hands in their coat-sleeves, and looked round in a furtive manner.

After a few formal speeches, Mr. Potter proceeded at once to business. Addressing Joyce, he said it was probably known to him that the gentleman on whom they had hitherto depended as a candidate for Brocksopp had thrown them over, and at the eleventh hour had left them to seek for another representative. In a few well-chosen and diplomatically rounded sentences, Mr. Potter pointed

out that the task that Mr. Bokenham had imposed upon them was by no means so difficult a one as might have been imagined. Mr. Potter would not, he said, indulge in any lengthened speech. His business was simply to explain the wishes of those for whom he and his partner had the honour to act—here he looked towards the leaders of the party, who did not attempt to disguise the fact that they were growing rather bored by the Potterian eloquence —and those wishes were, in so many words, that Mr. Joyce should step into the place which Mr. Bokenham had left vacant.

One of the leaders of the party here manifesting an intention of having something to say, and wishing to say it, Mr. Fyfe promptly interposed with the remark that he should be able to controvert an assertion, which he saw his young friend Mr. Joyce about to make, to the effect that he would be unable to carry on the contest for want of means. He, Mr. Fyfe, was empowered to assert that old Mr. Bokenham was so enraged at his son's defalcation, which he believed to have been mainly brought about by Tory agency, Lord Steppe's father, the Earl of Stair, being a notoriously bigoted Blue, that he was prepared to guarantee the expenses of any candidate approved of by the party and by the town. Mr. Fyfe here pausing to take breath, the leader, who had been previously baulked, cut in with a neat expression of the party's approval of Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Spalding murmured a few incoherent words to the effect that during a life-long acquaintance with his young friend the people of Brocksopp had been in entire ignorance that he had anything in him, politically or otherwise, beyond book-learning, and that was the main reason for their wishing him to represent them in Parliament.

Although a faint dawning of the truth had come across him when Mr. Harrington announced young Bokenham's defection, Walter Joyce had no definite idea of the honour in store for him. Very modestly, and in very few words, he accepted the candidature, promising to use every exer-

tion for the attainment of success. He was too much excited and overcome to enter into any elaborate discussion at that time. All he could do was to thank the leading members of the party for their confidence, to inform the parliamentary-agent firm that he would wait upon them the next day, and to assure Messrs. Spalding and Moule that the Liberals of Brocksopp would find him among them immediately. Did Walter Joyce falter for one instant in the scheme of retribution which he had foreshadowed, now that he was to be its exponent, now that the vengeance which he had anticipated was to be worked out by himself? No! On the contrary, he was more satisfied in being able to assure himself of the edge of the weapon, and of the strength of the arm by which the blow should be dealt.

"We calculated too soon upon the effect of young Bokenham's escapade, darling," said Mr. Creswell to his wife, on his return after a day in Brocksopp. "The field is by no means to be left clear to us. The walls of the town are blazing with the placards of a new candidate in the Liberal interest—a clever man, I believe—who is to have all the elder Bokenham's backing, and who, from previous connection, may probably have certain local interests of his own."

"Previous connection—local interest? Who can it be?" asked Marian.

"An old acquaintance of yours, I should imagine; at least, the name is familiar to me in connection with your father and the old days of Helmingham school. The signature to the address is 'Walter Joyce.'"

CHAPTER XXIX.

CANVASSING.

SPLENDID as was the opportunity just offered to Walter Joyce by the parliamentary agents, it is more than probable that he would have declined to profit by it had the scene of action been laid anywhere else than in Brocksopp, and his opponent been any one other than Mr. Creswell. Although utterly changed from the usher in a country school, who was accustomed to take life as it came,—or indeed from the young man who, when he obtained Lord Hetherington's private secretaryship, looked upon himself as settled for life,—Joyce had even now scarcely any ambition, in the common acceptation of the word. To most men brought up as he had been, membership of parliament would have meant London life in good society, excellent station of one's own, power of dispensing patronage and conferring favours on others, and very excellent opportunity for getting something pleasant and remunerative for one's self, when the chance offered. To Walter Joyce it meant the acceptance of a sacred trust, to the proper discharge and fulfilment of which all his energies were pledged by the mere fact of his acceptance of the candidature. Not, indeed, that he had ever had any thoughts of relinquishing his recently acquired profession, the press; he looked to that as his sole means of support; but he felt that should he be successful in obtaining a seat in the House, his work would be worth a great deal more than it had hitherto been, and he should be able to keep his income at the same amount while he devoted half of the time thus saved to his political duties.

But being, as has been said, thoroughly happy in his then career, Joyce would never have thought of entertaining the proposition made to him through the medium of Messrs. Potter and Fyfe had it not been for the desire of

revenging himself on Marian Creswell by opposing to the last, and, if possible, in every honourable way, by defeating, her husband. Joyce felt perfectly certain that Mr. Creswell—quiet, easy-going old gentleman as he had been of late years, and more likely than ever to be disinclined to leave his retirement and do battle in the world since his son's death—was a mere puppet in the hands of his wife, whose ambition had prompted her to make her husband seek the honour, and whose vanity would be deeply wounded at his failure. Walter Joyce's personal vanity was also implicated in the result, and he certainly would not have accepted the overtures had there not been a good chance of success; but Mr. Harrington, who, out of his business, was a remarkably sharp, shrewd, and far-seeing man of the world and of business, spoke very positively on this point, and declared their numbers were so strong, and the popular excitement so great in their favour, that they could scarcely fail of success, provided they had the right man to bring forward. To win the day against her; to show her that the man she basely rejected and put aside was preferred, in a great struggle, to the man she had chosen; that the position which she had so coveted for her husband, and towards the attainment of which she had brought into play all the influence of her wit and his money, had been snatched from her by the poor usher whom she had found good enough to play with in her early days, but who was thrust aside, his fidelity and devotion availing him nothing, directly a more eligible opportunity offered itself—that would be sweet indeed! Yes, his mind was made up; he would use all his energies for the prosecution of the scheme: it should be war to the knife between him and Marian Creswell.

Joyce's manner was so thorough and so hearty, his remarks were so practical, and his spirits so high, when he called on Messrs. Potter and Fyfe on the next day, that those gentlemen were far better pleased with him, and far more sanguine of his popularity and consequent success at Brocksopp, than they had been after the first

interview. Modesty and self-depreciation were qualities very seldom seen, and very little esteemed, in the parliamentary agents' offices in Abingdon Street. The opinion of the head of the firm was that Walter wanted "go;" and it was only owing to the strenuous interposition of Mr. Harrington, who knew Joyce's writings, and had more than once heard him speak in public, that they did not openly bemoan their choice and proceed to look out for somebody else. This, however, they did not do; neither did they mention their doubts to the deputation from Brocksopp, the members of which did not, indeed, give them time to do so, had they been so inclined, clearing out so soon as the interview was over, and barking back to the Tavistock Hotel, in Covent Garden, there to eat enormous dinners, and thence to sally forth for the enjoyment of those festivities in which our provincials so much delight, and the reminiscences of which serve for discussion for months afterwards. The parliamentary agents were very glad of their reticence the next day. The young man's heartiness and high spirits seemed contagious; the sound of laughter, a phenomenon in Abingdon Street, was heard by Mr. Harrington to issue from "the governors' room;" and old Mr. Potter forgot so far the staid dignity of a chapel-deacon as to clap Walter Joyce on the back, and wish him luck. Joyce was going down on his first canvass to Brocksopp by himself; he would not take any one with him, not even Mr. Harrington; he was much obliged to them; he knew something of Mr. South, the local Liberal agent (he laughed inwardly as he said this, remembering how he used to look upon Mr. South as a tremendous gun), and he had no doubt they would get on very well together.

"You know South, Mr. Joyce?" said Mr. Fyfe; "what a very curious thing! I should have thought that old South's celebrity was entirely local, or at all events confined to the county."

"Doubtless it is," replied Joyce; "but then you know I——"

"Ah! I forgot," interrupted Mr. Fyfe. "You have some relations with the place. Yes, yes, I heard! By the way, then, I suppose you know your opponent, Mr. Kerswill—Creswell—what's his name?"

"Oh yes, I remember Mr. Creswell perfectly; but he never saw much of me, and I should scarcely think would recollect me!"

"Ah! you'll excuse me, my dear sir," Mr. Fyfe added, after a short pause; "but of course there's no necessity to impress upon you the importance of courtesy towards your opponent—I mean Kerswill. You're certain to meet on the hustings; and most probably, in a swellish place like Brocksopp, you'll be constantly running across each other in the streets while you're on your canvass. Then, courtesy, my dear sir, before everything else!"

"You need not be afraid, Mr. Fyfe," said Joyce, smiling; "I shall be perfectly courteous to Mr. Creswell."

"Of course you will, my dear sir; of course you will! Mustn't think it odd in me to suggest it; part of my business to point these things out when I'm coaching a candidate; and necessary too, deuced necessary sometimes, though you wouldn't think it. Less than six months ago, when poor Wiggington was lost in his yacht in the Mediterranean—you remember?—we sent down a man to stand for his borough. Lord —— No! I won't tell you his name; but the eldest son of an earl. The other side sent down a man too—a brewer, or a maltster, or something of that kind; but a deucedly gentlemanly fellow. They met on their canvass, these two, just as you and Kerswill might; and this man, like a gentleman, took off his hat. What did our man do? Stopped still, stuck his glass in his eye, and stared; never bowed, never moved; give you my word. Had to withdraw him at once; his committee stood by and saw it, and wouldn't act for him any more. 'Lordship be damned!' that's what they said. Strong language, but that's what they said; give you my word. Had to withdraw him, too late to find another man; so our people lost the seat."

The first thing that astonished Joyce on his arrival at Brocksopp was the sight of his own name printed in large letters on flaming placards, and affixed in all the conspicuous places of the town. He had not given consideration to this sudden notoriety, and his first realisation of it was in connection with the thought of the effect it would have on Marian, who must have seen it; her husband must have told her of the name of his opponent; she must have been certain that it was not a person of similar name, but her discarded lover himself who was waging battle against her, and attacking her husband in the stronghold which he might have even considered safe. She would know the sentiments which had prompted him in leaving her last letter unanswered, in taking no notice of her since the avowal of her perfidy. Up to this time she might have pictured him to herself as ever bewailing her loss—as would have been the case had she been taken from him by death—as the prey of despair. Now she must know him as actuated by feelings far stronger and sterner; he was prepared to do battle to the death. This feeling was pre-eminent above all others; this desire for revenge, this delight at the occasion which had been offered him for lowering the pride and thwarting the designs of the woman who had done him such great wrong. He never faltered in his intention for a moment; he abated his scheming not one jot. He had some idea on the journey down to Brocksopp that perhaps the old reminiscences, which would naturally be kindled by the sight of the familiar scenes among which he would soon find himself, and of the once familiar faces by which he would be surrounded, would have a softening effect on his anger, and perhaps somewhat shake his determination. But on experience he did not find it so. As yet he had religiously kept away from the neighbourhood of Helmingham; he thought it better taste to do so, and his duties in canvassing had not called him thither. He had quite enough to do in calling on the voters resident in Brocksopp.

As Walter Joyce had not been to Helmingham, the village folk, who in their old-fashioned way were oddly punctilious, thought it a point of etiquette not to call upon him, though such as were politically of his way of thinking took care to let him know he might reckon on their support; and of all the people whom Walter had been in the habit of seeing almost daily in the village, Jack Forman, the ne'er-do-weel, was the only one who came over expressly to Brocksopp for the purpose of visiting his old friend. It was not so much friendship as constant thirst that prompted Jack's visit; he had been in the habit of looking on elections as institutions for the gratuitous supply of ale and spirits, extending more or less over the term of a month, to all who chose to ask for them, and hitherto he had been greatly disappointed in not finding his name on the free list of the Helmingham taverns. So it was well worth Jack's while to spend a day in staggering over to Brocksopp, and on his arrival he met with a very kind reception from Walter, sufficiently kind to enable him to bear up against the black looks and ill-suppressed growls of Mr. South, who, in his capacity of clerk to the magistrates, only knew Jack as a bit of a poacher, and a great deal of a drunkard.

Immediately on his arrival in Brocksopp, and after one or two preliminary interviews with Mr. South, who, as he imagined, had forgotten all about him, and was much struck by his knowledge of neighbouring persons and localities, Joyce proceeded with his canvass, and after a very brief experience felt that Mr. Harrington had not taken too rose-coloured a view of his chance of success. Although to most of the electors of Brocksopp he was personally unknown, and though such as remembered his father held him in recollection only as a sour, cross-grained man, with a leaning towards "Methodee" and a suspicion of avarice, the fact that Walter was not an entire stranger had great influence with many of the electors, and his appearance and manner won him troops of friends. *They* liked his frank face and hearty demeanour, they felt

that he was eminently "thorough," the lack of which quality had been the chief ground of complaint against young Bokenham, and they delighted in his lucid argument and terse way of laying a question before them and driving it home to their understanding. In this he had the advantage of his opponent; and many waverers, with undefined political opinions, who attended the public meetings of both parties, were won over to Joyce's side by the applause with which his speeches were received, and by the feeling that a man who could produce such an effect on his hearers must necessarily be a clever man, and the right person to be sent by them to Parliament. The fact was allowed even by his opponents. Mr. Teesdale wrote up to Mr. Gould that things were anything but bright, that the new man was amazingly popular, and quite young, which was not a bad thing when great exertion was required; that he was, moreover, a clever, rapid, forcible speaker, and seemed to be leaving their man very much behind. And old Croke, who had been induced to attend a meeting convened by the Liberals, and who, though for respectability's sake he had made no open disturbance, had been dreadfully shocked at the doctrines which he had heard, not merely promulgated, but loudly applauded, was afterwards compelled to confess to a select few at the Lion that the manner, if not the matter of Walter Joyce's speech was excellent. "Our squire," he said, "speaks like a gen'alman as he is, soft and quiet like, on and on like the droppin' o' watter, but this un du screw it into you hard and fast; and not content wi' drivin' on it home, he rivets un on t'other side."

Electioneering matters in Brocksopp wore a very different aspect to that which they had borne a short time previously. Mr. Teesdale had seen from the beginning that the candidature of young Mr. Bokenham was not likely to be very dangerous to his opponent, however liberally he might be backed by his indulgent father. The local agent, who had lived all his life among the Brocksoppians, was quite aware that they required a man

who would at all events pretend to be in earnest, whichever suffrages he courted, and his keen eyes told him at the first glance that young Tommy was a vacillating, purposeless pleasure-lover, who would command no confidence, and receive but few votes. When the Bokenham escapade took place Mr. Teesdale telegraphed the news to his principal, Mr. Gould, and in writing to him on the same subject by the next post said, "It is exactly what I always anticipated of young B., though his friends did not apparently see it. I think it will be a shock to the L.'s, and should not be surprised if our man had a walk-over." Mr. Teesdale was essentially a country gentleman, and though he thought Mr. Harrington a "turfy cad," saw no harm in occasionally employing a sporting phrase, even in his business. But now all was altered; the appearance of Walter Joyce upon the scene, the manner in which he was backed, his gentlemanly conduct and excellent speaking had an immediate and extraordinary effect. The Tory influence under Sir George Kent had been so all-powerful for many years, that all thoughts of a contest had been abandoned, and there were scores of men, farmers and manufacturers, on the register, who had never taken the trouble to record their vote. To the astonishment and dismay of Mr. Teesdale, most of them on being waited on in Mr. Creswell's interest, declared that their leanings were more towards Liberalism than Conservatism, and that now they had the chance of returning a candidate who would do them credit and be a proper advocate of their views, they should certainly give him their support. The fact, too, that Joyce was a self-made man told immensely in his favour, especially with the manufacturing classes. Mr. Harrington, who had paid a couple of flying visits to the town, had possessed himself of certain portions of Walter's family history, and disseminated them in such quarters as he thought would be advantageous.

"Father were grocer in village hard by!" they would repeat to one another in wonder, "and this young un *stuck* to his buke, and so crammed his head wi' lurnin'

that he's towt tu three Lards up in London, and writes in newspapers—think o' that now!" It was in vain that Mr. Teesdale, when he heard of the success of his opponent's move, went about pointing out that Mr. Creswell was not only a self-made man, having risen from nothing to his then eminence, but that all the money which he had made was engaged in the employment and development of labour. The argument was sound, but it did not seem to have the same effect; whatever it was, it had the same result, a decided preference for Mr. Joyce as against Mr. Creswell, amongst those who, possessing votes, had hitherto declined to use them.

But there was another class which it was necessary to propitiate, and with which Mr. Teesdale was afraid he stood but little chance. Many of the "hands" had obtained votes since the last election, and intended making use of their newly acquired prerogative. There was no fear of their not voting; the only question was on which side they would cast the preponderance of their influence. This was soon seen. Naturally they were inclined to support Walter Joyce, but whatever lingering doubts they may have had were dispelled as soon as Jack Byrne appeared upon the scene, and, despite of Joyce's protests, determined on remaining to assist in the canvass. "Why not?" said Jack; "let me have my way. I'm an old man now, lad, and haven't so many fancies that I mayn't indulge one now and again. The business suffer!" he said, in reply to something that Walter had said; "the business, indeed! You know well enough that the bird-stuffing now is a mere pretext—a mere something that I keep for my 'idle hands to do,' and that it's no necessity, thank the Lord! So let me bide here, lad, and aid in the good work. I think I may be of use among a few of them yet." And he was right. Not merely was the old man's name known and venerated among the older "hands," as one of the "martyrs of '48," but his quaint caustic tongue made him an immense favourite with the younger men; and soon there were no meetings brought to a close without loud demands *for a "bit* speech" from Jack Byrne.

Nor was it amongst the farmer and manufacturing classes alone that Mr. Joyce received pledges of support. Several of the neighbouring county gentry and clergy, who had hung back during Mr. Bokenham's candidature, enrolled themselves on the committee of the new-comer; and one of his most active adherents was Mr. Benthall. It was not until after due deliberation, and much weighing of pros and cons, that the head-master of Helmingham Grammar School took this step; but he smiled when he had thoroughly made up his mind, and muttered something to himself about its being "a shot for madam in more ways than one." When he had decided he was by no means underhand in his conduct, but went straight to Mr. Creswell, taking the opportunity of catching him away from home and alone, and told him that the Benthall family had been staunch Liberals for generations; and that, however much he might regret being opposed in politics to a gentleman for whom he entertained such a profound esteem and regard, he could not forswear the family political faith. Mr. Creswell made him a polite reply, and forthwith forgot all about it; and Marian, though she was in the habit of questioning her husband pretty closely at the end of each day as to the progress he had made, looked upon Mr. Benthall's vote as so perfectly secure that she never asked about the matter.

Notwithstanding the favourable reception which he met with everywhere, and the success which seemed invariably to attend him in his canvass, Joyce found it very heavy work. The constant excitement soon began to tell upon him, and the absurdity of the questions sometimes asked, or the pledges occasionally required of him, irritated him so much that he began to inquire of himself whether he was really wise in going through with the affair, and whether he was not paying a little too dearly even for that revenge for which he had longed, and which was almost within his grasp. His fidelity to the cause to which he had pledged himself would doubtless have caused *him to* smother these murmurings without any extraneous

aid; but just at that time he had an adventure which at once put an end to all doubt on the subject.

One bright wintry morning he arose at the hotel with the determination to take a day's rest from his labours, and to endeavour to recruit himself by a little quiet and fresh air. He had been up late the previous night at a very large meeting of his supporters, the largest as yet gathered together, which he had addressed with even more than wonted effect. He felt that he was speaking more forcibly than usual; he could not tell why, he did not even know what prompted him; but he felt it. It could not have been the presence of the parliamentary agent, Mr. Fyfe, who had come down from London to see how his young friend was getting on, and who was really very much astonished at his young friend's eloquence. Walter Joyce was speaking of the way in which the opposite party had, when in power, broken the pledges they had given, and laughed to scorn the promises they had made when seeking power, and in dilating upon it he used a personal illustration, comparing the voters to a girl who had been jilted and betrayed by her lover, who had been unexpectedly raised to riches. Unconsciously fired by his own experience, he displayed a most forcible and highly wrought picture of the despair of the girl and the villainy of the man, and roused his audience to a perfect storm of enthusiasm. No one who heard him, as he thought, except Jack Byrne, had the least inkling of his story, or of its effect upon his eloquence; but the "hands" were immensely touched and delighted, and the effect was electrical. Walter went home thoroughly knocked up, and the next morning the reaction had set in. He felt it impossible to attend to business, sent messages to Mr. Fyfe and to Byrne, telling them they must get on without him for the day, and, after a slight breakfast, hurried out of the hotel by the back way. There were always plenty of loafers and idlers hanging round all sides of the house, eager to stare at him, to prefer a petition to him, or to point him out to their friends; but this morning he was lucky enough to

escape them, and, thanks to his knowledge of the locality, to strike upon an unfrequented path, which soon took him clear of the town and brought him to the open fields.

He had forgotten the direction in which the path led, or he would most probably have avoided it and chosen some other, for there lay Helmingham village directly before him. Hitherto he had carefully avoided even looking towards it, but there it was, under his eyes. At some distance it is true, but still sufficiently near for him, with his knowledge of the place, to recognise every outline. There, away on the horizon, was the school-house; there the church; there, dipping down towards the middle of the High Street, the house which had been so long his father's. What years ago it seemed! There were alterations, too; several newly built houses, a newly made road leading, he supposed, to Woolgreaves. Woolgreaves! he could not see the house, he was thankful for that, but he overlooked a portion of the grounds from where he stood, and saw the sun reflected from much sparkling glass, evidently conservatories of recent erection. "She's spending the price for which she sold me!" he muttered to himself.

He crossed a couple of fields, clambered over a hedge, and jumped down into the newly made road which he had noticed, intending, after pursuing it a short distance, to strike across, leaving Woolgreaves on his right, and make for Helmingham. He could roam about the outskirts of the old place without attracting attention and without any chance of meeting with her. He had gone but a very little way when he heard a sharp, clear, silvery tinkling of little bells, then the noise of horse-hoofs on the hard, dry road, and presently came in sight a little low carriage, drawn by a very perfect pair of iron-gray ponies, and driven by a lady dressed in a sealskin cloak and a coquettish sealskin hat. He knew her in an instant. Marian!

While he was deliberating what to do, whether to remain where he was or jump the hedge and disappear, *before* he could take any action the pony carriage had

neared him, and the ponies were stopped by his side. She had seen him in the distance, and recognised him too; he knew that by the flush that overspread her usually pale face. She was looking bright and well, and far handsomer than he ever remembered her. He had time to notice all that in one glance, before she spoke.

"I am glad of this accidental meeting, Mr. Joyce!" she said, with the slightest tremor in her voice, "for though I had made up my mind to see you I did not see the opportunity."

Walter merely bowed.

"Do you mind walking with me for five minutes? I'll not detain you longer." Walter bowed again. "Thank you very much. James, follow with the ponies." She stepped out of the carriage with perfect grace and dignity, just touching with the tips of her fingers the arm which Walter, half in spite of himself, held out.

"You will not expect me to act any part in this matter, Mr. Joyce," she said, after a moment's pause. "I mean to make no pretence of being astonished at finding you here, in direct opposition to me and mine!"

"No, indeed! that would be time wasted, Mrs. Creswell," said Walter, speaking for the first time. "Opposition to you and yours is surely the thing most likely to be expected in me."

"Exactly! Although at first I scarcely thought you would take the breaking off of our relations in the way you did, I guessed it when you did not write; I knew it, of course, when you started here, but I was never so certain of your feelings in regard to me as I was last night."

"Last night?"

"Last night! I was present at the Mechanics' Institute, sitting in the gallery with my maid and her brother as escort. I had heard much of your eloquence, and wanted to be convinced. It seems I selected a specially good occasion. You were particularly scathing."

"I spoke what I felt——"

"No doubt; you could not have spoken so without having felt all you described, so that I can completely imagine how you feel towards me. But you are a sensible man, as well as a good speaker, and that is why I have determined to apply to you."

"What do you want, Mrs. Creswell?"

"I want you to go out of this place, Mr. Joyce; to take your name off the walls, and your candidature out of the county! I want you to give up your opposition to my husband. You are too strong for him—you personally; not your cause, but you. We know that; the last three days have convinced everybody of that, and you'll win the election if you stop."

Joyce laughed aloud. "I know I shall," he said, his eyes gleaming.

"What then?" said Marian, quietly. "Do you know what a poor member of Parliament is, 'hanging on' at every one's beck and call, hunted by all, respected by none, not knowing which to serve most as most likely to be able to serve him—would you like to be that, would your pride suffer that? That's all these people want of you—to make you their tool, their party's tool; for you yourself they have not the remotest care. Do you hear?"

"I do. But you have not told me, Mrs. Creswell, what I should get for retiring?"

"Your own terms, Walter Joyce, whatever they were. A competence for life—enough to give you leisure to follow the life in which, as I understand, you have engaged, in ease, when and where you liked. No drudgery, no anxiety, all your own settled on yourself!"

"You are strangely anxious about the result of this election, Mrs. Creswell."

"I am—and I am willing to pay for it."

Joyce laughed again—a very unpleasant laugh. "My dear Mrs. Creswell," said he, "if government could promise me ten times your husband's fortune to withdraw from this contest, I would refuse. If I had your husband's *fortune*, I would gladly forfeit it for the chance of winning

this election, and defeating you. You will excuse my naming a money value for such pleasure; but I know that hitherto it has been the only one you could understand or appreciate. Good morning!" And he took off his hat and left her standing in the road.

CHAPTER XXX.

BAFFLED.

MARIAN remained standing where Walter Joyce had left her, gazing after his retreating figure until it had passed out of sight. At first so little did she comprehend the full meaning of the curt sentence in which he had conveyed to her his abrupt rejection of the bribe which she had proposed to him, his perfect appreciation of the snare which she had prepared for him, that she had some sort of an idea that he would hesitate on his career, stop, turn back, and finally consent, if not to an immediate concession to her views, at all events to some further discussion, with a view to future settlement. But after his parting bow he strode unrelentingly onward, and it was not until he had reached the end of the newly made road, and, dropping down into the meadows leading to Helmingham, had entirely disappeared, that Marian realised how completely she had been foiled, was able to understand, to estimate, and, in estimating, to wince under, the bitter scorn with which her suggestion had been received, the scathing terms in which that scorn had been conveyed. A money value for anything to be desired—that was the only way in which he could make it clear to her understanding or appreciation—was not that what he had said? A money value! Marian Creswell was not of those who sedulously hide their own failings from themselves, shrink

at the very thought of them, make cupboard-skeletons of them, to be always kept under turned key. Too sensible for this, she knew that this treatment only enhanced the importance of the skeleton, without at all benefiting its possessor, felt that much the better plan was to take it out and subject it to examination, observe its form and its articulation, dust its bones, see that its joints swung easily, and replace it in its cupboard-home. But all these rites were, of course, performed in private, and the world was to be kept in strict ignorance of the existence of the skeleton. And now Walter Joyce knew of it; a money value, her sole standard of appreciation. Odd as it may seem, Marian had never taken the trouble to imagine to herself to what motive Walter would ascribe her rejection of him, her preference of Mr. Creswell. True, she had herself spoken in her last letter of the impossibility of her enjoying life without wealth and the luxuries which wealth commands, but she had argued to herself that he would scarcely have believed that, principally, perhaps, from the fact of her having advanced the statement so boldly, and now she found him throwing the argument in her teeth. And if Walter knew and understood this to be the dominant passion of her soul, the great motive power of her life, the knowledge was surely not confined to him —others would know it too. In gaining her position as Mr. Creswell's wife, her success, her elation, had been so great as completely to absorb her thoughts, and what people might say as to the manner in which that success had been obtained, or the reasons for which the position had been sought, had never troubled her for one instant. Now, however, she saw at once that her designs had been suspected, and doubtless talked of, sneered at, and jested over, and her heart beat with extra speed, and the blood suffused her cheeks, as she thought of how she had probably been the subject of alehouse gossip, how the townsfolk and villagers amongst whom, since the canvassing time, she had recently been so much, must have

all discussed her after she had left their houses, and all had their passing joke at the young woman who had married the old man for his money. She stamped her foot in rage upon the ground as the idea came into her mind; it was too horrible to think she should have afforded scandal-matter to these low people, it was so galling to her pride; she almost wished that—and just then the sharp, clear, silvery tinkle of the little bells sounded on her ear, and the perfectly-appointed carriage with the iron-gray ponies came into view, and the next minute she had taken the reins from James, had received his salute, and, drawing her sealskin cloak closely round her, was spinning towards her luxurious home, with the feeling that she could put up with all their talk, and endure all their remarks, so long as she enjoyed the material comforts which money had undoubtedly brought her.

Marian started on her return drive in a pleasant frame of mind, but the glow of satisfaction had passed away long before she reached home, and had been succeeded by very different feelings. She no longer cared what the neighbouring people might say about her; she had quite got over that, and was pondering, with gradually increasing fury, over the manner in which Walter Joyce had received her proposition, and the light and airy scorn, never for one moment striven to be concealed, with which he had tossed it aside. She bit her lip in anger and vexation as she thought of her tremendous folly in so speedily unfolding her plan without previously making herself acquainted with Joyce's views, and seeing how he was likely to receive the suggestion; she was furious with herself as she recalled his light laugh and easy bearing, so different from anything she had previously seen in him, and—by the way, that was odd; she had not noticed it before, but undoubtedly he was very much improved in appearance and manner; he had lost the rustic awkwardness and bashfulness which had previously rendered him

somewhat ungainly, and had acquired confidence and ease. She had heard this before; her husband had mentioned it to her as having been told him by Mr. Teesdale, who kept the keenest outlook on Joyce and his doings, and who regarded him as a very dangerous opponent; she had heard this before, but she had paid but little attention to it, not thinking that she should so soon have an opportunity of personally verifying the assertion. She acknowledged it now; saw that it was exactly the manner which would prove wonderfully winning among the electors, who were neither to be awed by distant demeanour nor to be cajoled by excessive familiarity. In Walter Joyce's pleasant bearing and cheery way there was a something which seemed to say, "I am of you, and understand you, although I may have had, perhaps, a few more brains and a little better education;" and there was nothing that more quickly got to the hearts of the Brocksoppians than the feeling that they were about to elect one of themselves. This was a chord which Mr. Creswell could never touch, although he had every claim to do so, and although Mr. Gould had had thousands of a little pamphlet struck off and circulated among the voters—a little pamphlet supposed to be Mr. Creswell's biography, adorned with woodcuts borrowed from some previous publication, the first of which represented Mr. Creswell as a cabin-boy, about to receive the punishment of the "colt" from the mate—he had scarcely been on board ship during his life—while the last showed him, and Mrs. Creswell, with short waist, long train, and high ostrich feathers in her head (supposed to have been originally the *vera* effigies of some lady mayoress in George the Third's time), receiving the cream of the aristocracy in a gilded saloon. But the people declined to believe in the biography, which, indeed, did rather more harm than good, and cast doubt on the real history of Mr. Creswell's self-manufacture, than which, in its way, nothing could be more creditable.

Before Marian had reached her home she had revolved all these things very carefully in her mind, and the result which she arrived at was, that as it was impossible to purchase peace, and as the fight must now be fought out at all hazards, the only way—not indeed to insure success, for that was out of the question, but to stand a good chance for it—was to pay fresh and unremitting attention to the canvassing, and, above all, to try personally to enlist the sympathies of the voters, not leaving it, as in Woolgreaves it had hitherto been done, to Mr. Teesdale and his emissaries. With all her belief in money, Marian had a faith in position, which, though lately born, was springing up apace, and she felt that Squire Creswell might yet win many a vote which would be given to him out of respect to his status in the county, if he would only exert himself to obtain it.

Full of this idea, she drove through the lodge-gates at Woolgreaves, any little qualms or heart-sinkings which she might have recently felt disappearing entirely as she looked round upon the trim gardens, trim even in those first days of winter, and upon the long line of conservatories which had recently risen under her direction, as the hall-doors opened at her approach, and as she stepped out of her pony-carriage, the mistress of that handsome mansion, warmed and flower-scented and luxurious. Her pleasure was a little dashed when she found that Mr. Creswell had been carried off into Brocksopp by Mr. Gould, who had come down unexpectedly from London, and that Mr. Benthall was seated in the drawing-room with Maude and Gertrude, evidently intending to remain to luncheon, if he were invited. But she rallied in a moment, and accorded the invitation graciously, and did the honours of the luncheon table with all proper hospitality. Once or twice she winced a little at the obvious understanding between Gertrude and Mr. Benthall; a state of things for which, though to some extent prepared, she was by no means particularly grateful. It was not entirely new to

her, this flirtation; she had noticed something of it a while ago, and her husband had made it the subject of one of his mild little jokes to her; but she had matters of greater import to attend to just then, and would see how it should be treated when the election was over.

After luncheon Marian, recollecting the determination she had arrived at in her homeward drive, was minded to put it in force at once, and accordingly said to her visitor, "Are you going back to the school, Mr. Benthall, or do you make holiday this afternoon?"

"Fortunately, my dear Mrs. Creswell," said Mr. Benthall, with a slight sign of that indolence which the consumption of an excellent luncheon superinduces in a man of full habit—"fortunately the law has done that for me! Wednesdays and Saturdays are half-holidays by—well, I don't know exactly by Act of Parliament, but at all events by Helmingham rule and system; so, to-day being Saturday, I am absolved from further work. To my infinite satisfaction, I confess."

"I am glad of that," said Marian; "for it will leave you free to accept my proposition. I have some business in Brocksopp, and I want an escort. Will you come?"

"I shall be delighted," replied Mr. Benthall, "though I shall keep up my unfortunate character for plain speaking by asking you not to dawdle too long in the shops! I do get so horridly impatient while ladies are turning over a counterful of goods!"

"My dear Mr. Benthall, pray spare yourself any such dreadful anticipations! The business that takes me into Brocksopp is of a widely different character."

"And that is——"

"How can you ask at such a crisis?" said Marian, in a mock heroic style, for her spirits always rose at the prospect of action. "In what business should a wife be engaged at such a time but her husband's? My business of course is—electioneering!"

"Electioneering—you?"

"Well, canvassing; you know perfectly well what I mean!"

"And you want me to go with you?"

"Why not? Mr. Benthall, what on earth is all this questioning about?"

"My dear Mrs. Creswell, do you not know that it is impossible for me to go with you on the expedition you propose?"

"No, I do not know it! Why is it impossible?"

"Simply because in politics I happen to be diametrically opposed to Mr. Creswell. My sympathies are strongly Liberal."

"Then, in the present election your intention is to vote against Mr. Creswell, and for his opponent?"

"Undoubtedly. Is this the first time you have heard this?"

"Most unquestionably! Who should have told me?"

"Mr. Creswell! Directly it was known that he would come forward in the Conservative interest, I told him my views!"

"He did not mention the circumstance to me," said Marian; then added, after a moment, "I never asked him about you, to be sure! I had no idea that there was the least doubt of the way in which you intended to vote."

There was a dead silence for a few minutes after this, a pause during which Gertrude Creswell took advantage of Marian's abstraction to catch Maude's eye, and to shape her mouth into the silent expression of the word "Row" —delivered 'three times with great solemnity. At last Marian looked up and said, with an evidently forced smile, "Well, then, I must be content to shrug my shoulders, and submit to these dreadful politics so far dividing us that I must give up all idea of your accompanying me into Brocksopp, Mr. Benthall; but I shall be obliged if you will give me five minutes' conversation—I will not detain you longer—in the library."

Mr. Benthall, muttering that he should be delighted,

rose from his chair and opened the door for his hostess to pass out; before he followed her he turned round to glance at the girls, and again Gertrude's fresh rosy lips pressed themselves together and then opened for the silent expression of the word "Row," but he took no notice of this cabalistic sign beyond nodding his head in a re-assuring manner, and then followed Mrs. Creswell to the library.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Benthall," said Marian, dropping into a chair at the writing-table, and commencing to sketch vaguely on the blotting-book with a dry pen; "the news you told me just now has come upon me quite unexpectedly. I had no idea—looking at your intimacy in this house—intimacy which, as far as I know, has continued uninterruptedly to the present moment—no idea that you could have been going to act against us at so serious a crisis as the present."

Mr. Benthall did not like Mrs. Creswell, but he was a man of the world, and he could not avoid admiring the delicious insolence of the tone of voice which lent additional relish to the insolence of the statement, that he had continued to avail himself of their hospitality, while intending to requite it with opposition. He merely said, however, "The fault is not mine, Mrs. Creswell, as I have before said; immediately on the announcement of the contest, and of Mr. Creswell's coming forward as the Conservative candidate, I went straight to him and told him I was not a free agent in the matter. I labour under the misfortune—and it is one for which I know I shall receive no sympathy in this part of the country, for people, however good-hearted they may be, cannot pity where they cannot understand—I labour under the misfortune of coming of an old family, having had people before me who for years and years have held to Liberal opinions in fair weather and foul weather, now profiting by it, now losing most confoundedly, but never veering a hair's breadth for an instant. In those opinions I was

brought up, and in those opinions I shall die; they may be wrong, I don't say they are not; I've not much time, or opportunity, or inclination, for the matter of that, for going very deeply into the question. I've taken it for granted, on the strength of the recommendation of wiser heads than mine; more than all, on the fact of their being the family opinions, held by the family time out of mind. I'm excessively sorry that in this instance those opinions clash with those held by a gentleman who is so thoroughly deserving of all respect as Mr. Creswell, and from whom I have received so many proofs of friendship and kindness. Just now it is especially provoking for me to be thrown into antagonism to him in any way, because—however, that's neither here nor there. I dare say I shall have to run counter to several of my friends hereabouts, but there is no one the opposition to whom will concern me so much as Mr. Creswell. However, as I've said before, it is a question of sticking to the family principles, and in one sense to the family honour, and—so there's nothing else to be done."

Marian sat quietly for a minute, before she said, "Not having had the honour of belonging to an old family so extensively stocked with traditions, not even having married into one, I am perhaps scarcely able to understand your position, Mr. Benthall. But it occurs to me that 'progress' is a word which I have heard not unfrequently mentioned in connection with the principles for the support of which you seemed prepared to go to the stake, and it seems to me an impossible word to be used by those who maintain a set of political opinions simply because they received them from their ancestors."

"Oh, of course it is not merely that! Of course I myself hold and believe in them!"

"Sufficiently to let that belief influence your actions at a rather important period of your life? See here, Mr. Benthall; it happens to be my wish, my very strong wish, that my husband should be returned for Brocksopp at this

election. I do not hide from myself that his return is by no means certain, that it is necessary that every vote should be secured. Now, there are certain farmers, holding land in connection with the charity under which the school was founded—there is no intended harm in my use of the word, for my father was paid out of it as well as you, remember—farmers who, holding the charity land, look to the master of the school, with an odd kind of loyalty, as their head, and, in such matters as an election, would, I imagine, come to him for advice how to act. Am I right?"

"Perfectly right."

"You know this by experience? They have been to you?"

"Some of them waited on me at the school-house several days ago!"

"And you made them pledge themselves to support Mr.—Mr. Joyce?"

"No, Mrs. Creswell, I am a schoolmaster and a clergyman, *not* an electioneering agent. I explained to them to the best of my power the views taken by each party on the great question of the day, and, when asked a direct question as to how I should myself vote, I answered it—that was all."

"All, indeed! It is sufficient to show me that these unthinking people will follow you to the polling-booth like sheep! However, to return to what I was about to say when I thought of these farmers; is your belief in your attachment to these principles so strong as to allow them to influence your actions at what may be an important period of your life? I know the Helmingham school-salary, Mr. Benthall; I know the life—Heaven knows I ought, after all the years of its weariness and its drudgery which I witnessed. You are scarcely in your proper place, I think! I can picture you to myself in a pleasant rectory in a southern or western county, with a charming wife by your side!"

"A most delightful idea, Mrs. Creswell, but one impossible of realisation in my case, I am afraid!"

"By no means so impossible as you seem to imagine. I have only to say one word to my husband, and——"

"My dear Mrs. Creswell," said Mr. Benthall, rising, and laying his hand lightly on her arm, "pray excuse my interrupting you; but I am sure you don't know what you are saying or doing! Ladies have no idea of this kind of thing; they don't understand it, and we cannot explain. I can only say that if any man had—well, I should not have hesitated a moment in knocking him down!" And Mr. Benthall, whose manner was disturbed, whose voice trembled, and whose face was very much flushed, was making rapidly to the door, when Marian called him back.

"I am sorry," she said, very calmly, "that our last interview should have been so disagreeable. You will understand that, under present circumstances, your visits here, and your acquaintance with any of the inmates of this house, must cease."

Mr. Benthall looked as though about to speak, but he merely bowed and left the room. When the door closed behind him, Marian sank down into her chair, and burst into a flood of bitter tears. It was the second repulse she had met with that day, and she had not been accustomed to repulses, of late.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN INCOMPLETE VICTORY.

MR. BENTHALL'S neat cob was not standing in a loose box in the Woolgreaves stable, as was its usual wont when its master had paid a visit to that hospitable mansion. On this occasion the schoolmaster had walked over from Helmingham, and, though by nature an indolent man, Mr. Benthall was exceedingly pleased at the prospect of the walk before him on emerging from Woolgreaves after his interview in the library with Mrs. Creswell. He felt that he required a vent for the excitement under which he was labouring, a vent which could only be found in sharp and prolonged exercise. The truth was that he was very much excited and very angry indeed. "It is a very charitable way of looking at it—a more than charitable way," he muttered to himself as he strode over the ground, "to fancy that Mrs. Creswell was ignorant of what she was doing; did not know that she was offering me a bribe to vote for her husband, and to influence the farmers on this estate to do the same. She knew it well enough; she is by far too clever a woman not to understand all about it. And if she would try that game on with us, who hold a comparatively superior position, what won't she do with those lower on the electoral roll? Clever woman too, thorough woman of the world. I wonder at her forgetting herself, and showing her hand so completely. How admirably she emphasised the 'any of the inmates' in that sentence when she gave me my congé! it was really remarkably well done! When I tell Gertrude this, it will show her the real facts at once. She has had a firm impression that, up to the present time, 'madam,' as she calls Mrs. Creswell, has had no idea as to the state of the case

between us; but I don't think even incredulous Gertrude would have much doubt of it if she had been present, and caught the expression of Mrs. Creswell's face as she forbade my communication with 'any' of the inmates of her house. Neither look nor tone admitted of the smallest ambiguity, and I took care to appreciate both. Something must be done to circumvent our young friend the hostess of Woolgreaves."

Thus soliloquised the Reverend George Benthall as he strode across the bleak barren fields, chopping away with his stick at the thin naked hedges as he passed them, pushing his hat back from his brow, and uttering many sounds which were at least impatient, not to say unclerical, as he progressed. After his dinner, feeling that this was an exceptional kind of evening, and one which must be exceptionally treated, he went down to his cellar, brought therefrom a bottle of excellent Burgundy, lit up his favourite pipe, placed his feet on the fender, and prepared himself for a careful review of the occurrences of the day. On the whole, he was satisfied. It may seem strange that a man, indolent, uncaring about most things, and certainly desirous of the opportunity for the acquisition of worldly goods, should have refused the chance of such a position as Marian hinted he might aspire to—a position which her own keen natural instinct and worldly knowledge suggested to her as the very one which he would most covet—but it must be remembered that Mr. Benthall was a man of birth and family, bound to indorse the family politics in his own person, and likely to shrink from the merest suggestion of a bribe as the highest insult and indignity that could possibly be offered him. One of Marian's hints went home; when she told him that all acquaintance between him and any member of the Woolgreaves household must cease, the bolt penetrated. The easy attention which Mr. Benthall had just paid to the rather odd, but decidedly amusing, niece of rich Squire Creswell had developed into a great liking, which had

grown into a passion deeper and stronger than this calm, placid—well, not to disguise the fact, selfish—clergyman had ever imagined he could have experienced; and although in his homeward walk he was pleased to smile in his complimentary fashion at Mrs. Creswell's skill in aiming the arrow, when he turned the whole matter over in his mind after dinner, he was compelled to allow that it was exceedingly unpleasant, and that he did not see how affairs between himself and Gertrude were to be carried out to a happy issue without bringing matters to a crisis. For this crisis long-headed and calculating Mr. Benthall had been for some time prepared—that is to say, he had long entertained the idea that after a time Mrs. Creswell, getting tired of the alternations in the state of armed neutrality or actual warfare, in one or other of which she always lived with the young ladies, and feeling towards them as Haman felt towards Mordecai, with the aggravation of their all being women, would certainly do her best towards getting them removed from Woolgreaves; and doing her best meant, when Mr. Creswell was the person to be acted upon, the accomplishment of her designs. But Mr. Benthall felt tolerably certain, from his knowledge of Mr. Creswell, and the conversation in some degree bearing on the subject which they had had together, that though the old gentleman would not be able to withstand, nor indeed would for a moment attempt to fight against the pressure which would be put upon him by his wife for the accomplishment of her purpose, even though that preference were to the disadvantage of his blood relations, that result once achieved, he would do everything in his power to insure the girls' future comfort, and would not abate one jot of the liberal pecuniary allowance which he had always intended for them on the occasion of their marriage. It was very comforting to Mr. Benthall, after due deliberation, to come to this conclusion; for though he was very much attached to Gertrude Creswell, and though of late he had begun to think she was so indispensable to his future

happiness that he could almost have married her without any dowry, yet it was pleasant to think that—well, that she would not only make him a charming wife, but bring a very handsome increase to his income—when the storm arrived.

The storm arrived sooner than Mr. Benthall anticipated: it must have been brewing while he was seated with his feet on the fender, enjoying that special bottle of Burgundy and that favourite pipe. As he sat at his breakfast he received a note from Gertrude, which said, "There has been the most terrible fuss here this evening! I don't know what you and madam can have fought about during that dreadfully solemn interview in the library to which she invited you, *but she is furious against you!* She and uncle were closeted together for nearly an hour after he came in from Brocksopp; and when they joined us in the dining-room his eyes were quite red, and I'm sure he had been crying. Poor old darling! isn't it a shame for that—never mind. After dinner, just as we were about to run off as usual, madam said she wanted to speak to us, and marched us off to the drawing-room. When we got there she harangued us, and told us it was only right we should know that you had behaved in a most treacherous and unfriendly manner towards uncle, and that your conduct had been so base that she had been compelled to forbid you the house. I was going to speak at this, but Maude dashed in, and said she did not believe a word of it, and that it was all madam's concoction, and that you were a gentleman, and I don't know what—you understand, all sorts of nice things about you! And then madam said you had thrown over uncle, to whom you owed such a debt of gratitude—what for, goodness knows! —and were going to vote for uncle's opponent, Mr. Joyce, who—— But then I dashed in, and I said that, considering what people said about her and Mr. Joyce, and the engagement that had existed between them, she ought not to say anything against him. And Maude tried to

stop me; but my blood was up, and I would go on, and I said all kinds of things; and madam grew very pale, and said that, though she was disposed to make every allowance for me, considering the infatuation I was labouring under—that's what she said, infatuation I was labouring under—she could not put up with being insulted in her own house, and she should appeal to uncle. So she went away, and presently she and uncle came back together, and he said he was deeply grieved and all that—poor old dear, he looked awful—but he could not have his wife treated with disrespect—disrespect, indeed! —and he thought that the best thing that could be done would be for us to go away for a time, at least; only for a time, the dear old man said, trying to look cheerful; for if he succeeded in this election he and Mrs. Creswell would necessarily be for several months in London, during which we could come back to Woolgreaves; but for a time, and if we would only settle where we would go, Parker, our maid, who is a most staid and respectable person, would go with us, and all could be arranged. I think Maude was going to fly out again; but a look at the dear old man's woebegone face stopped her, and she was silent. So it's decided we're to go somewhere out of this. But is it not an awful nuisance, George? What shall we do? Where shall we go? It will be a relief to get rid of madam for a time, and out of the reach of her eyes and her tongue; but doesn't it seem very horrible altogether?"

"Horrible altogether! It does, indeed, seem very horrible altogether," said Mr. Benthall to himself, as he finished reading this epistle, and laid it down on the breakfast-table before him. "What on earth is to be done? This old man seems perfectly besotted, while this very strong-minded young woman, his wife, has completely gleaned the brains out of his head and the kindliness out of his heart. What can he be thinking about, to imagine that these two girls are to take some lodging

and form some course for themselves? Why, the thing is monstrous and impossible! They would have to live in seclusion; it would be impossible for any man ever to call upon them; and oh, it won't do at all, won't do at all! But what's to be done? I can't interfere in the matter, and I know no one with whom I could consult. Yes, by George! Joyce, our candidate, Mr. Joyce; he's a clear-headed fellow, and one who, I should think, if Mrs. Covey's story be correct, would not object to put a spoke in Mrs. Creswell's wheel. I'll go and see him. Perhaps he can help me in this fix."

No sooner said than done. The young gentlemen on the foundation and the head-master's boarders had that morning to make shift with the teaching of the ushers, while the neat cob was taken from his stable at an unwonted hour, and cantered down to Brocksopp. Mr. Joyce was not at his head-quarters, he was out canvassing; so the cob was put up, and Mr. Benthall started on a search-expedition through the town. After some little time he came up with the Liberal candidate, with whom he had already struck up a pleasant acquaintance, and begged a few minutes of his time. The request was granted. They adjourned to Joyce's private sitting-room at the inn, and there Mr. Benthall laid the whole story before him, showing in detail Marian's machinations against the girls, and pointing out the final piece of strategy by which she had induced her husband to give them the rout, and tell them they could no longer be inmates of his house. Joyce was very much astonished; for although the film had gradually been withdrawn from his eyes since the day of the receipt of Marian's letter, he had no idea of the depth of her degradation. That she could endeavour to win him from the tournament now he stood a good chance of victory; that she would even endeavour to bribe a man like Benthall, who was sufficiently venal, Walter thought, who had his price, like most men, but who had not been properly "got at," he could understand; but that she

could endeavour to attempt to wreak her vengeance on two unoffending girls, simply because they were remotely connected with one of the causes of her annoyance, was beyond his comprehension. He saw, however, at once, that the young ladies were delicately situated; and, partly from an innate feeling of gallantry, partly with a desire to oblige Benthall, who had proved himself very loyal in the cause, and not without a desire to thwart what was evidently a pet scheme with Mrs. Creswell, he took up the question with alacrity.

"You're quite right," he said, after a little consideration, "in saying that it would be impossible that these two young ladies could go away and live by themselves, or rather with their maid. I know nothing of them, beyond seeing them a long time ago. I should not even recognise them were we to meet now; but it is evident that by birth and education they are ladies, and they must not be thrown on the world, to rough it in the manner proposed by their weak uncle, at the instigation of his charming wife. The question is, what is to be done with them? Neither you nor I, even if we had the power and will, dare offer them any hospitality, miserable bachelors as we are. The laws of etiquette forbid that; and we should have Mrs. Grundy, egged on by Mrs. Creswell, calling us over the coals, and bringing us to book very speedily. It is clear that in their position the best thing for them would be to be received by some lady relative of their own, or in default of that, by some one whose name and character would be a complete answer to anything which our friends Mrs. Grundy or Mrs. Creswell might choose to say about them. Have they no such female relations? No! I fear then that, for their own sakes, the best thing we can do is not to interfere in the matter. It is very hard for you, I can see clearly, as you will be undoubtedly deterred from paying any visits to Miss Gertrude until—— Stay, I've an idea: it's come upon me so suddenly that it has almost taken my breath away, and

I don't know whether I dare attempt to carry it out. Wait, and let me think it over."

The idea that had occurred to Joyce was, to lay the state of affairs before Lady Caroline Mansergh, and ask her advice and assistance in the matter. He felt certain that she would act with promptitude, and at the same time with great discretion. Her knowledge of the world would tell her exactly what was best to be done under the circumstances; while the high position which she held in society, and that not alone by reason of her rank, would effectually silence any malicious whisperings and critical comments which would inevitably be made on the proceedings of a less-favoured personage. The question was, dare he ask her to interfere in the matter? He had no claim on her, he knew; but she had always shown him such great favour, that he thought he might urge his request without offence. Even in the last letter which he had received from her, just before he started on his election campaign, she reminded him of his promise to allow her to be of service to him in any possible way, and never to permit any idea of the magnitude or difficulty of the task to be undertaken to influence him against asking her to do it. Yes, he felt sure that Lady Caroline would be of material assistance to him in this emergency; the only question was, was he not wasting his resources? These young ladies were nothing to him; to him it was a matter of no moment whether they remained at Woolgreaves or were hunted out to genteel lodgings. Stay, though. To get rid of them from their uncle's house, to remove them from her presence, in which they were constantly reminding her of bygone times, had, according to Mr. Benthall's story, been Marian Creswell's fixed intention from the moment of her marriage. Were they to leave now, outcast and humbled, she would have gained a perfect victory; whereas if they were received under the chaperonage of a person in the position of Lady Caroline Mansergh, it would be anything but a degradation of

station for the young ladies, and a decided blow for Mrs. Creswell. That thought decided him; he would invoke Lady Caroline's aid at once.

"Well," said he, after a few minutes' pause, when he had come to this determination, "you have waited, and I have thought it over——"

"And the result is——?" asked Mr. Benthall.

"That I shall be bold, and act upon the idea which has just occurred to me, and which is briefly this: There is in London a lady of rank and social position, who is good enough to be my friend, and who, I feel certain, will, if I ask her to do so, interest herself in the fortunes of these two young ladies, and advise us what is best to be done for them under present circumstances. It is plain that after what has occurred they can stay no longer at Woolgreaves."

"Perfectly plain. Maude would not listen to such a thing for a moment, and Gertrude always thinks with her sister."

"That's plucky in Miss Maude; and pluck is not a bad quality to be possessed of when you are thrown out into the world on your own resources, as some of us know from experience. Then they must leave as soon as possible. Lady Caroline Mansergh, the lady of whom I have just spoken, will doubtless be able to suggest some place where they can be received, and where they would have the advantage of her occasional surveillance."

"Nothing could possibly be better," cried Mr. Benthall, in great glee. "I cannot tell you, Mr. Joyce, how much I am obliged to you for your disinterested co-operation in this matter."

"Perhaps my co-operation is not so disinterested as you imagine," said Joyce, with a grave smile. "Perhaps —but that's nothing now."

"Will you write to Lady Caroline Mansergh at once? Time presses, you know."

"Better than that, I will go up to London and see her.

There will necessarily be a lull in the canvassing here for the next two or three days, and I shall be able to explain far more clearly than by letter. Besides, I shall take the opportunity of seeing our friends Potter and Fyfe, and hearing the best news from head-quarters."

"That is merely an excuse," said Mr. Benthall; "I am sure you are undertaking this journey solely with the view of serving these young ladies and me."

"And myself, my good friend," replied Joyce; "and myself, I assure you."

Lady Caroline Mansergh had a very charming little house in Chesterfield Street, Mayfair, thoroughly homeish and remarkably comfortable. Since she had been left a widow she had frequently passed the winter, as well as the season, in London, and her residence was accordingly arranged with a due regard to the miseries of our delightful climate. Her ladyship was in town, Joyce was glad to find; and after he had sent up his name, he was shown into a very cosy drawing-room, with a large fire blazing on the hearth, and all the draughts carefully excluded by means of portières and thick hanging curtains. He had merely time to notice that the room was eminently one to be lived in, and not kept merely for show—one that was lived in, moreover, as the sign of a woman's hand, everywhere recognisable, in the management of the flowers and the books, in the work-basket and the feminine writing arrangements, so different, somehow, from a man's desk and its appurtenances, plainly showed—when the door opened, and Lady Caroline entered the room.

She was looking splendidly handsome. In all the work and worry of his recent life, Joyce had lost all except a kind of general remembrance of her face and figure, and he was almost betrayed into an exclamation of astonishment as he saw her advancing towards him. There must have been something of this feeling in the expression of his face, for Lady Caroline's cheeks flushed

for an instant, and the voice in which she bade him welcome, and expressed her pleasure of seeing him, was rather unsteady in its tone.

"I imagined you were at Brocksopp," she said, after a minute; "indeed I have some idea that quite recently I saw a report in the paper of some speech of yours, as having been delivered there."

"Perfectly correct: I only came up last night."

"And how goes the great cause? No, seriously, how are you progressing; what are the chances of success? You know how interested I am about it!"

"We are progressing admirably, and if we can only hold out as we are doing, there is very little doubt of our triumph!"

"And you will enter upon the career which I suggested to you, Mr. Joyce, and you will work in it as you have worked in everything else which you have undertaken, with zeal, energy, and success!" said Lady Caroline, with flashing eyes. "But what has brought you to London at this particular time?"

"You, Lady Caroline!"

"I?" and the flush again overspread her face.

"You. I wanted your advice and assistance."

"Ah! I recollect you said just now, 'if we could only hold out as we are doing.' How foolish of me not at once to—— Mr. Joyce, you—you want money to pursue this election, and you have shown your friendship for me by——"

"No, indeed, Lady Caroline, though there is no one in the world to whom I would so gladly be under an obligation. No; this is a matter of a very different kind;" and he briefly explained to her the state of affairs at Woolgreaves, and the position of Maude and Gertrude Creswell.

After he had concluded there was a momentary pause, and then Lady Caroline said, "And you do not know either of these young ladies, Mr. Joyce?"

"I do not. I have scarcely seen them since they were children."

"And it is for the sake of revenge on her that he is taking all this trouble!" thought Lady Caroline to herself; "that woman threw away a priceless treasure; the manw ho can hate like this must have a great capacity for loving." Then she said aloud, "I am very glad you came to me, Mr. Joyce, as this is plainly a case where prompt action is needed. When do you return to Brocksopp?"

"To-night."

"Will you be the bearer of a note from me to Miss Creswell? I shall be delighted to have her and her sister here, in this house, as my guests, as long as it may suit them to remain."

"Lady Caroline, how can I thank you?"

"By asking me to do some service for you yourself, Mr. Joyce. This is merely general philanthropy."

Marian Creswell was in great exultation, for several reasons. Mr. Joyce had hurried suddenly to London, and a report had been started that he was about to abandon the contest. That was one cause for her delight. Another was that the girls had evidently accepted their defeat in the last contest as final, and she should be rid of them for ever. She had noticed various preparations for departure, and had seen heavy boxes lumbering the passages near their rooms, but had carefully avoided making any inquiries, and had begged her husband to do likewise.

"They will go," she said, "and it will be for the best. Either they or I must have gone, and I suppose you would prefer it should be they. It is their duty to say where they purpose going, and what they purpose doing. It will be time enough for you to refuse your consent, if the place of selection be an objectionable one, when they tell us where it is."

Two days after that conversation Mr. and Mrs. Cres-

well were sitting together after luncheon, when Maude entered the room. She took no notice of Marian, but said to her uncle, "Gertrude and I are going away to-morrow, uncle, for some time, if not for ever. You won't be astonished to hear it, I know, but it is our duty to tell you."

"Well, Maude, I—going away—I confess, not entirely news to me," said Mr. Creswell, hopelessly feeble; "where are you going, child?"

"We have accepted an invitation we have received, uncle."

"An invitation? I did not know you knew any one, Maude. From some of your old school companions?"

"No, uncle; from Lady Caroline Mansergh—a friend of Mr. Benthall's and Mr. Joyce's, uncle."

Marian looked up, and the light of triumph faded out of her eyes. It was but an incomplete victory, after all!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SHATTERING OF THE IDOL.

THE fact that his nieces had actually left the shelter of his roof, although, as he had hitherto believed, that result had been brought about by their own wilfulness and impatience of control, came upon Mr. Creswell with almost stunning force. True, Marian had mentioned to him that it was impossible that she and the girls could ever live together in amity—true, that he himself had on more than one occasion been witness of painful scenes between them—true, that the girls' departure had been talked of for a week past as an expected event, and that the preparations for it lay before his eyes; but he had not realised the

fact; his mind was so taken up with the excitement of the coming election contest, that he had scarcely noticed the luggage through which he had occasionally to thread his way, or, if he had noticed it, had regarded its presence there as merely a piece of self-assertion on the part of impetuous Maude or silly Gertrude, determined to show, foolish children as they were, that they were not to be put down by Marian's threats, but were ready to start independently whenever such a step might become necessary. That Marian would ever allow them to take this step, Mr. Creswell never imagined; he thought there had always been smouldering embers of warfare, needing but a touch to burst into a blaze, between his wife and his nieces; he knew that they had never "hit it," as he phrased it; but his opinion of Marian was so high, and his trust in her so great, that he could not believe she would be sufficiently affected by these "women's tiffs" as to visit them with such disproportionate punishment. Even in the moment of adieu, when Gertrude, making no attempt to hide her tears, had sobbingly kissed him and clung about his neck, and Maude, less demonstrative, but not less affectionate, had prayed God bless him in a broken voice—she passed Mrs. Creswell with a grave bow, taking no notice of Marian's extended hand—the old man could scarcely comprehend what was taking place, but looked across to his wife, hoping she would relent, and with a few affectionate words wished the girls a pleasant visit to London, but bid them come back soon to their home.

But Marian never moved a muscle, standing there, calm and statuesque, until the door had closed upon them and the carriage had rolled away; and then the first sound that issued from her lips was a sigh of relief that, so far, her determination had been fulfilled without much overt opposition, and without any "scene." Not that she was by any means satisfied with what she had done; she had accomplished so much of her purpose as consisted in removing the girls from their uncle's home, but instead

of their being reduced in social position thereby—which, judging other people, as she always did, by her own standard, she imagined would be the greatest evil she could inflict upon them—she found her plans had been attended with an exactly opposite result. The entrance into society, which she had so long coveted, and which she had hoped to gain by her husband's election, not merely now seemed dim and remote, owing to the strong possibility of Mr. Creswell's failure, but would now be open to Maude and Gertrude, through the introduction of this Lady Caroline Mansergh, of whose high standing, even amongst her equals, Marian had heard frequently from Mr. Gould, her one link with the great world. This was a bitter blow; but it was even worse to think that this introduction had been obtained for the girls through the medium of Walter Joyce—the man she had despised and rejected on account of his poverty and social insignificance, and who now not merely enjoyed himself, but had apparently the power of dispensing to others, benefits for which she sighed in vain. Now, for the first time, she began to appreciate the estimation in which Walter was held by those whose esteem was worth having. Hitherto she had only thought that the talent for "writing" which he had unexpectedly developed had made him useful to a political party, who, availing themselves of his services in a time of need, gave him the chance of establishing himself in life; but so far as position was concerned, he seemed to have already had, and already to have availed himself of, that chance; for here was the sister of an earl, a woman of rank and acknowledged position, eager to show her delight in doing him service! "And that position," said Marian to herself, "I might have shared with him! Marriage with me would not have sapped his brain or lessened any of those wonderful qualities which have won him such renown. To such a man a career is always open, and a career means not merely sufficient wealth, but distinction and fame. And I rejected him—*for what?*"

These reflections and others of similar import formed a constant subject for Marian's mental exercitation, and invariably left her a prey to discontent and something very like remorse. The glamour of money-possession had faded away; she had grown accustomed to all it had brought her, and was keenly alive to what it had not brought her, and what she had expected of it—pleasant society, agreeable friends, elevated position. In her own heart she felt herself undervaluing the power of great riches, and thinking how much better was it to have a modest competence sufficient for one's wants, sufficient to keep one from exposure to the shifts and pinches of such poverty as she had known in her early life, when combined with a position in life which gave one the chance of holding one's own amongst agreeable people, rather than to be the Croesus gaped at by wondering yokels, or capped to by favour-seeking tenants. A few months before, such thoughts would have been esteemed almost blasphemous by Marian; but she held them now, and felt half inclined to resent on her husband his ignorant and passive share in the arrangement which had substituted him for Walter Joyce.

That was the worst of all. After Maude and Gertrude Creswell left Woolgreaves, an unseen but constantly present inmate was added to the household, who sat between husband and wife, and whispered into their ears alternately. His name was Doubt, and to Mr. Creswell he said—"What has become of all those fine resolutions which you made on your brother Tom's death?—resolutions about taking his children under your roof, and never losing sight of them until they left as happy brides? Where are they now? Those resolutions have been broken, have they not? The girls, Tom's daughters—orphan daughters, mind—have been sent away from what you had taught them to look upon as their home—sent away on some trivial excuse of temper—and where are they now? You don't know!—you, the uncle, the self-

constituted guardian—positively don't know where they are! You have had the address given you, of course, but you cannot imagine the place, for you have never seen it; you cannot picture to yourself the lady with whom they are said to be staying, for you never saw her, and, until your wife explained who she was, you had scarcely even heard of her. Your wife! Ah! that is a pleasant subject! You've found her all that you expected, have you not? So clever, clear-headed, bright, and, withal, so docile and obedient? Yet she it was who quarrelled with your nieces, and told you that either she or they must leave your house. She it was who saw them depart with delight, and who never bated one jot of her satisfaction when she noticed, as she cannot have failed to notice, your emotion and regret. Look back into the past, man—think of the woman who was your trusted helpmate in the old days of your poverty and struggle!—think of her big heart, her indomitable courage, her loving womanly nature, beaming ever more brightly when the dark shadows gathered round your lives!—think of her, man, compare her with this one, and see the difference!"

And to Marian the dim personage said—"You, a young woman, handsome, clever, and with a lover who worshipped you, have bartered yourself away to that old man sitting there—for what? A fine house, which no one comes to see—carriages, in which you ride to a dull country town to receive the bows of a dozen shopkeepers, and drive home again—hawbuck servants, who talk against you as they talk against every one, but always more maliciously against any whom they have known in a different degree of life—and the title of the squire's lady! You are calculated to enjoy life which you will never behold, and to shine in society to which you will never be admitted. You wanted money, and now you have it, and how much good has it done you? Would it not have been better to have waited a little—just a little—not to have been quite so eager to throw away the worshipping lover,

who has done so well, as it has turned out, and who is in every way but ill replaced by the old gentleman sitting there?"

The promptings of the dim presence worked uncomfortably on both the occupants of Woolgreaves, but they had the greatest effect on the old gentleman sitting there. With the departure of the girls, and the impossibility which attended his efforts to soften his wife's coldness and do away with the vindictive feeling which she entertained towards his nieces, Mr. Creswell seemed to enter on a new and totally different sphere of existence. The bright earnest man of business became doddering and vague, his cheery look was supplanted by a worn, haggard, fixed regard; his step, which had been remarkably elastic and vigorous for a man of his years, became feeble and slow, and he constantly sat with his hand tightly pressed on his side, as though to endeavour to ease some gnawing pain. A certain amount of coldness and estrangement between him and Marian, which ensued immediately after his nieces' departure, had increased so much as entirely to change the ordinary current of their lives; the pleasant talk which he used to originate, and which she would pursue with such brightness and earnestness as to cause him the greatest delight, had dwindled down into a few careless inquiries on her part, and meaningless replies from him; and the evenings, which he had looked forward to with such pleasure, were now passed in almost unbroken silence.

One day Mr. Gould, the election agent, arrived from London at Brocksopp, and, without going into the town, ordered the fly which he engaged at the station to drive him straight to Woolgreaves. On his arrival there he asked for Mrs. Creswell. The servant, who recognised him and knew his business—what servant at houses which we are in the habit of frequenting does not know our business and all about us, and has his opinion, generally unfavourable, of us and our affairs?—doubted

whether he had heard aright, and replied that his master had gone to Brocksopp, and would be found either at the mills or at his committee-rooms. But Mr. Gould renewed his inquiry for Mrs. Creswell, and was conducted by the wondering domestic to that lady's boudoir. The London agent, always sparse of compliments, spoke on this occasion with even more than usual brevity.

"I came to see you to-day, Mrs. Creswell, and not your husband," said he, "as I think you are more likely to comprehend my views, and to offer me some advice."

"Regarding the election, Mr. Gould?"

"Regarding the election, of course. I want to put things in a clear light to you, and, as you're a remarkably clear-headed woman—oh no, I never flatter, I don't get time enough—you'll be able to turn 'em in your mind, and think what's best to be done. I should have made the communication to your husband six months ago, but he's grown nervous and fidgety lately, and I'd sooner have the advantage of your clear brain."

"You are very good—do you think Mr. Creswell's looking ill?"

"Well—I was going to say you mustn't be frightened, but that's not likely—you're too strong-minded, Mrs. Creswell. The fact is, I do see a great difference in the old—I mean Mr. Creswell—during the last few weeks, and not only I, but the people too."

"You mean some of the electors?"

"Yes, some of his own people, good staunch friends. They say they can't get anything out of him now, can't pin him to a question. He used to be clear and straightforward, and now he wanders away into something else, and sits mumchance, and doesn't answer any questions at all."

"And you have come to consult me about this?"

"I've come to say to you that this won't do at all. He is pledged to go to the poll, and he must go, cheerily and pleasantly, though there is no doubt about it that we *shall* get an awful thrashing."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure so. We were doing very well at first, and Mr. Creswell is very much respected and all that, and he would have beat that young What's-his-name—Bokenham —without very much trouble. But this Joyce is a horse of a different colour. Directly he started the current seemed to turn. He's a good-looking fellow, and they like that; and a self-made man, and they like that; and he speaks capitally, tells 'em facts which they can understand, and they like that. He has done capitally from the first; and now they've got up some story—Harrington did that, I fancy, young Harrington acting for Potter and Fyfe, very clever fellow—they've got up some story that Joyce was jilted some time ago by the girl he was engaged to, who threw him over because he was poor, or something of that sort, I can't recollect the details—and that has been a splendid card with the women; they are insisting on their husbands' voting for him; so that altogether we're in a bad way."

"Do you think Mr. Creswell will be defeated, Mr. Gould? You'll tell me honestly, of course."

"It's impossible to say until the day, quite impossible, my dear Mrs. Creswell; but I'm bound to confess it looks horribly like it. By what I understand from Mr. Croke, who wrote to me the other day, Mr. Creswell has given up attending public meetings, and that kind of thing, and that's foolish, very foolish."

"His health has been anything but good lately, and——"

"I know; and of course his spirits have been down also. But he must keep them up, and he must go to the poll, even if he's beaten."

"And the chances of that are, you think, strong?"

"Are, I fear, very strong! However, something might yet be done if he were to do a little house-to-house canvassing in his old bright spirits. But in any case, Mrs. Creswell, he must stick to his guns, and we look to you to keep him there!"

"I will do my best," said Marian, and the interview was at an end.

As the door closed behind Mr. Gould, Marian flung herself into an easy-chair, and the bitter tears of rage welled up into her eyes. So it was destined that this man was to cross her path to her detriment for the rest of her life. Oh, what terrible shame and humiliation to think of him winning the victory from them, more especially after her interview with him, and the avowal of her intense desire to be successful in the matter! There could be no doubt about the result. Mr. Gould was understood, she had heard, to be in general inclined to take a hopeful view of affairs; but his verdict on the probable issue of the Brocksopp election was unmistakably dolorous. What a bitter draught to swallow, what frightful mortification to undergo! What could be done? It would be impolitic to tell Mr. Creswell of his agent's fears; and even if he were told of them, he was just the man who would more than ever insist on fighting until the very last, and would not imagine that there was any disgrace in being beaten after gallant combat by an honourable antagonist. And there was no possible way out of it, unless—great Heaven, what a horrible thought!—unless he were to die. That would settle it; there would be no defeat for him then, and she would be left free, rich, and with the power to—— She must not think of anything so dreadful. The noise of wheels on the gravel, the carriage at the door, and her husband descending. How wearily he drags his limbs down the steps, what lassitude there is in every action, and how wan his cheeks are! He is going towards the drawing-room on the ground-floor, and she hastens to meet him there.

"What is the matter? Are you ill?"

"Very—very ill; but pleased to see you, to get back home." This with a touch of the old manner, and in the old voice. "Very ill, Marian; weak, and down, and depressed. I can't stand it, Marian; I feel I can't."

"What is it that seems too much for you?"

"All this worry and annoyance, this daily contact with all these horrible people. I must give it up, Marian; I must give it up!"

"You must give what up, dear?"

"This election. All the worry of it, the preliminary worry, has been nigh to kill me, and I must have no more of it!"

"Well, but think——"

"I have thought, and I'm determined; that is, if you think so too. I'll give it up, I'll retire; anything to have done with it!"

"But what will people say——?"

"What people, who have a right to say anything?"

"Your committee, I mean—those who have been working for you so earnestly and so long."

"I don't care what they say. My health is more important than anything else—and you ought to think so, Marian!"

He spoke with a nervous irritability such as she had never previously noticed in him, and looked askance at her from under his gray eyebrows. He began to think that there might be some foundation of truth in Gertrude's out-blurted sentiment, that Mrs. Creswell thought of nothing in comparison with her own self-interest. Certainly her conduct now seemed to give colour to the assertion, for Marian seemed annoyed at the idea of his withdrawal from seeking a position by which she would be benefited, even where his health was concerned.

Mr. Creswell was mistaken. Marian, in her inmost heart, had hailed this determination of her husband's with the greatest delight, seeing in it, if it were carried out, an excellent opportunity for escaping the ignominy of a defeat by Walter Joyce. But after this one conversation, which she brought to a close by hinting that of course his wishes should be acted upon, but it would perhaps be better to leave things as they were, and not

come to any definite conclusion for the present, she did not allude to the subject, but occupied her whole time in attending to her husband, who needed all her care. Mr. Creswell was indeed very far from well. He went into town occasionally, and, at Marian's earnest request, still busied himself a little about the affairs of the election, but in a very spiritless manner; and when he came home he would go straight to the library, and there, ensconced in an easy-chair, sit for hours staring vacantly before him, the shadow of his former self. At times, too, Marian would find his eyes fixed on her, watching all her motions, following her about the room, not with the lingering loving looks of old, but with an odd furtive glance; and there was a pitiful expression about his mouth, too, at those times, which was not pleasant to behold. Marian wondered what her husband was thinking of. It was a good thing that she did not know; for as he looked at her—and his heart did not refuse to acknowledge the prettiness, and the grace, and the dignity which his eyes rested on—the old man was wondering within himself what could have induced him, at his time of life, to marry again—what could have induced her, seemingly all sweetness and kindness, to take an inveterate hatred to those two poor girls, Maude and Gertrude, who had been turned out of the house, forced to leave the home which they had every right to consider theirs, and he had been too weak, too much infatuated with Marian, to prevent the execution of her plans. But that should not be. He was ill then, but he would soon be better, and so soon as he found himself a little stronger he would assume his proper position, and have the girls back again. He had been giving way too much recently, and must assert himself. He was glad now he had said nothing about giving up the election to any one save Marian, as he should certainly go on with it —it would be a little healthy excitement to him; he had suffered himself to fall into very dull moping ways, but

he would soon be all right. If he could only get rid of that odd numbing pain in the left arm, he should soon be all right.

Little Dr. Osborne was in the habit of retiring to rest at an early hour. In the old days, before his "girl" married, he liked to sit up and hear her warble away at her piano, letting himself be gradually lulled off to sleep by the music; and in later times, when his fireside was lonely and when he was not expecting any special work, he would frequently drive over to Woolgreaves, or to the Churchills at the Park, and play a rubber. But since he had quarrelled with Mrs. Creswell, since her "most disrespectful treatment of him," as he phrased it, he had never crossed the threshold at Woolgreaves, and the people at the Park were away wintering in Italy, so that the little doctor generally finished his modest tumbler of grog at half-past ten and "turned in" soon after. He was a sound sleeper, his housekeeper was deaf, and the maid, who slept up in the roof, never heard anything, not even her own snoring, so that a late visitor had a bad chance of making his presence known. A few nights after the events just recorded, however, one of Mr. Creswell's grooms attached his horse to the doctor's railings and gave himself up to performing on the bell with such energy and determination, that after two minutes a window opened and the doctor's voice was heard demanding, "Who's there?"

"Sam, from Woolgreaves, doctor, wi' a note."

"From Woolgreaves!—a note! What's the matter?"

"Squire's bad, had a fit, I heerd housekeeper say, and madam she have wrote this note for you! Come down, doctor; it's marked 'mediate, madam said. Do come down!"

"Eh?—what—Woolgreaves—had a fit—Mrs. Creswell—I'm coming!" and the window was shut, and in a few minutes Sam was shivering in the hall, while the doctor

read the note by the gaslight in his surgery. "Hum!—'No doubt you'll be surprised'—should think so, indeed—'has been long ill'—thought so when I saw him in the Corn Exchange on Saturday—'just now had some kind of frightful seizure'—poor dear old friend—'calls for you—insists on seeing you—for God's sake come'—dear me, dear me!" And the doctor wiped his honest old eyes on the back of his tattered old dressing-gown, and poured out a glass of brandy for Sam, and another for himself, and gave the groom the key of the stable, and bade him harness the pony, for he should be ready in five minutes.

The house was all aroused, lights were gleaming in the windows, as the doctor drove up the avenue, and Marian was standing in the hall when he entered. She stepped forward to meet him, but there was something in the old man's look which stopped her from putting out her hand as she had intended, so they merely bowed gravely, and she led the way to her husband's room, where she left him.

Half an hour elapsed before Dr. Osborne reappeared. His face was very grave and his eyes were red. This time it was he who made the advance. A year ago he would have put his arm round Marian's neck and kissed her on the forehead. Those days were past, but he took her hand, and in reply to her hurried question, "What do you think of him?" said, "I think, Mrs. Creswell, that my old friend is very ill. It would be useless to disguise it—very ill indeed. His life is an important one, and you may think it necessary to have another opinion"—this a little pompously said, and met with a gesture of dissent from Marian—"but in mine, no time must be lost in removing him, I should say, abroad, far away from any chance of fatigue or excitement."

"But, Dr. Osborne—the—the election!"

"To go through the election, Mrs. Creswell, would kill him at once! He would never survive the nomination day!"

"It will be a dreadful blow to him," said Marian. But she thought to herself, "Here is the chance of our escape from the humiliation of defeat by Walter Joyce! A means of evoking sympathy instead of contempt!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TOO LATE.

Dr. Osborne's opinion of Mr. Creswell's serious state, and the absolute necessity for the old gentleman's immediate withdrawal from everything calculated to cause worry or excitement, consequently from the election, was soon promulgated through Brocksopp, and caused the greatest consternation amongst the supporters of the Tory policy. Mr. Teesdale was summoned at once to Woolgreaves, and there had a long interview with Mrs. Creswell, who convinced him—he had been somewhat incredulous at first, being a wary man of the world, and holding the principle that doubt and disbelief were on the whole the safest and most remunerative doctrines—that it was physically impossible for her husband to continue the contest. The interview took place in the large, carpeted, and furnished bow-window recess on the landing immediately outside the door of Mr. Creswell's room, and, as Mr. Teesdale afterwards remarked in conversation with Mr. Gould, whom he summoned by telegraph from London, there was no question of any malingering or shamming on the old gentleman's part, as he could be heard groaning, poor old boy, in a very lamentable manner, and Dr. Osborne, who called at the time, said his patient was by no means out of the wood yet. Mr. Teesdale's talk, professional as it was, was tinged with more sympathy and respect for the sufferer

than were Mr. Gould's remarks. Mr. Teesdale had other relations in business with Mr. Creswell; he was his land agent and general business representative, had known him intimately for years, and had experienced innumerable kindnesses at his hands; whereas, Mr. Gould had simply made Mr. Creswell's acquaintance in his capacity of Conservative candidates' dry-nurse, and Mr. Creswell was to him merely an errant and peccant ninepin, which, from fate or its own shortcomings, it was impossible for him, skilful "setter-up" though he were, to put properly on end. He saw this after five minutes' conversation with his local representative, Mr. Teesdale, and saw that there was an end of his chance, so far as Brocksopp was concerned. "It won't do here, Teesdale," he said; "this finishes our business! It hasn't looked very promising throughout, but if this old character had gone to the poll, and specially if he had said one or two things you could have crammed him with on the nomination day, we might have pulled through! You see he's so eminently respectable, and though he, of course, is not to be compared with this young chap that Potter and Fyfe's people have got hold of—and where they dug him up astonishes me! Newspaper office, eh? 'Gad, we haven't got much of that sort of stuff in the newspaper offices of our party—however, though the old gentleman couldn't hold a candle to this young Joyce, I'm not sure that we couldn't have got him in. They'd have had the show of hands and the hurraying and all that; but we know how much that's worth, and what with Sir George Neal's people and our own, we could have run him deuced close, even if we didn't win. Nuisance it is, too, for he's kept us from running anybody else. There was young Clare, Sir Willis Clare's eldest son, was up in Pall Mall the other day, ready to go in for anything, and with rather a hankering for this place, which his father sat for once; but I said we were booked, and *now*—confound it!"

Mr. Teesdale was scarcely less upset. He talked vaguely of getting Mr. Creswell's consent, so soon as he was sufficiently recovered to be able to entertain the topic, to the substitution of some good Conservative candidate in his place; but Mr. Gould treated this proposition with a scornful laugh, and told him that they would have had to do all they knew to pull Mr. Creswell through, and that to attempt to run anybody else at that late period would be madness. So a private meeting of the principal supporters of the party was held at the Lion, and Mr. Gould—who had run up to London in the interim, and had an interview with the chief wire-pullers—announced that in consequence of Mr. Creswell's unfortunate illness, it had been decided to withdraw him from the candidature, and, as there was no prospect of success for any one else who might be started in the same interest, to refrain from contesting the borough at this election. This announcement was received in dead silence, broken by Mr. Croke's frank and outspoken denunciation of the cowardice, the "trem'lousness," the "not to put too foin a p'int upon it, the funk" which seemed to have seized upon some as "owt t' knaw better." The meeting was held in the evening, most of the company present had steaming glasses of grog before them, and Mr. Croke's outspoken oratory elicited a vast amount of applause and knocking on the tables with the stalwart feet of the tumblers. A young farmer of the neighbourhood, popular from his openhandedness and his skill in rifle-shooting—he was champion badge-holder in the local volunteers—rose and suggested that any such abject surrender as that proposed was ill-advised and inexpedient, and sat down, after finishing a long rambling speech, the purport of which was that some one should be put forward to fill the gap created by Mr. Creswell's lamented but unavoidable illness. That the gap should be filled, seemed to be a popular idea; but each of the ten or twelve speakers who subsequently addressed the meet-

ing had different people for the post: and it was not until Mr. Teesdale pointed out the utter futility of attempting to begin the fight anew under a fresh banner, confessing that they would have had very great difficulty in bringing matters to a successful issue even with all the prestige of Mr. Creswell's name and position, that it seemed to dawn upon the meeting that their chance was hopeless. This had been told them at the outset by Mr. Gould; but he was from London, and, consequently, in the ideas of the farmers present, steeped in duplicity of every kind, and labouring under an impossibility of truth-speaking. Mr. Teesdale had infinitely more weight with his audience. They knew him as a man whose word was to be relied on, and the impossibility of doing anything beyond swallowing the bitter pill was acknowledged among them from that moment. True, that the pill was so bitter as to require the consumption of an extraordinary amount of brandy-and-water to get it down, a fact which helped to console old Tilley, the landlord, for the shock to his political principles. It is to be noted, also, that after the withdrawal of Messrs. Gould and Teesdale, the meeting gave itself up to harmony of a lugubrious character, and dismal ditties, mixed with fierce denunciations of democrats and reformers, were borne away on the still night air.

So, within a day or two, the walls of Brocksopp were covered with placards signed in Mr. Creswell's name, setting forth the sad cause which prevented him from further exertion in the interests of freedom and purity of election, lamenting the impossibility of being able conscientiously to recommend a proper candidate to the constituency at so short a notice, but bidding the electors not to despair so long as there remained to them a House of Lords and an omniscient aristocracy. This document, which was the production of Mr. Teesdale (Mr. Gould had been called away to superintend certain other strongholds

where the fortifications showed signs of crumbling), was supplemented by the copy of a medical certificate from Dr. Osborne, which stated that Mr. Creswell's condition was such as to imperatively demand the utmost quietude, and that any such excitement as that to be caused by entering on an election contest would probably cost him his life.

The news was already known at the enemy's head-quarters. On the morning after the meeting at the Lion, Mr. Harrington, who had been duly informed of all that had taken place by a spy in whom he could place implicit confidence, walked over to Shuttleworth, the nearest telegraphic station, and thence despatched the following enigmatic message to his firm: "Brocksopp Stakes. Old Horse broken down in training. Our Colt will walk over." It happened that Mr. Potter was alone when this telegram arrived, and to him it was utterly unintelligible; but Mr. Fyfe, who came in shortly afterwards, and who was acquainted with and tolerant of the vagaries of his clerk's intellect, soon guessed at the situation, and explained it to his partner.

So it fell out that the election for Brocksopp, which had attracted attention even amongst great people in the political world, and which was looked forward to with intense interest in the neighbourhood, passed off in the quietest and tamest manner. The mere fact of the knowledge that there was to be no opposition, no contest, robbed the nomination day of all its interest to hundreds of farmers in outlying places, who did not care to give up a day's work when there was to be no "scrimmage" as a requital for their sacrifice of time; and the affair was consequently thoroughly orderly and commonplace. There were comparatively few persons present, and five minutes after Joyce's speech, in which he returned thanks for the honour done to him, and alluded with much nice feeling to his late opponent's illness, had concluded, the market-

square was deserted, and the clumsy hustings remained the sole memorial of the event to which so many had looked forward for so long.

Jack Byrne was horribly disgusted at the tame manner in which the victory had been won. The old man's life had been passed in the arena: he was never so happy as when he or some of his chosen friends were on the verge of conflict; and to see the sponge thrown up when the boy whom he had trained with so much care, and on whom he placed every dependence, was about to meet with a foeman worthy of his steel, who would take an immense deal of beating, and whom it would be a signal honour to vanquish, annoyed the old free lance beyond measure. It was only by constantly repeating to himself that his boy, his Walter, whom he had picked up starving and friendless at Bliffkins's coffee-house, was now a member of Parliament, with the opportunity of uttering in the British senate those doctrines which he had so often thundered forth amidst the vociferous applause of the club, those opinions with which he, old Jack Byrne, had indoctrinated him, that he was able to perceive that, although without any grand blaze of triumph, a great result had been achieved. Mr. Harrington, too, was by no means pleased that all his jockeyship should have been thrown away on so tame an event. He admitted as much to Mr. South, the local agent, who was mildly rejoicing in the bloodless victory, and who was grateful for the accident by which success had been secured. Mr. Harrington entirely dissented from this view of the case. "I call it hard," he said, "deuced hard, that when I had reduced the thing to a moral, when I had made all arrangements for a waiting race, letting the other side go ahead, as I knew they would, making the running like mad, and getting pumped before the distance; we waiting on them quietly, and then just at the last coming with a rush, and beating them on the post,—I say it is deuced hard when a fellow has given

all his time and brains to arranging this; to find he's reduced to a mere w. o. To be sure, as you say, one collars the stakes all the same, but still it ain't sport!"

There was one person, however, to whom the knowledge that the election had gone off flatly was delightful —Marian Creswell. As she had stood that night in her dressing-gown, with her dishevelled hair hanging over her shoulders, listening to Dr. Osborne's verdict on her husband's state, she had seen in his strongly pronounced opinion a safe, plausible, and immediate chance of escape from that most dreaded defeat by Walter Joyce at the election; and though she had apparently received the decision with deepest regret, she was inwardly delighted. At all events, there would be no absolute victory. Walter Joyce could not go away and tell his friends in the great world in London that he had defeated his adversary. No one could say what might have been the issue of the contest had Mr. Creswell's health not given way; and Marian was perfectly confident that Walter's chivalrous nature would prevent his ever mentioning to any one the interview which had taken place between him and her, or what passed thereat. On the whole, it was the best thing that could have happened for her. She had for some time foreseen that there was no chance of establishing herself in society through the election as she had once hoped; and anything would be better than that she should suffer defeat—absolute defeat—in a matter which she had so nearly at heart.

Anything? her husband's illness, dangerous illness, for instance? Yes, anything. She had never pretended to herself that she had loved Mr. Creswell. She had done her duty by him strictly, even to casting out all thoughts, all remembrance, of the lover of her youth; and it is an odd and not a very gratifying sign of the weakness of the human heart to think that Marian had frequently taken credit to herself for the sense of wifely duty which had

induced her to eliminate all memories of early days, and all recollections of Walter Joyce, from her mind. Her husband was very much her senior; she could not have hoped that he would live very long, and if he were to be removed—— There was, however, no question of that at present. Within a few days of the attack to which Dr. Osborne had been called, Mr. Creswell had recovered consciousness, and gradually had so far mended as to be able to take interest in what was passing round him. One of his first expressed wishes was to see Mr. Benthall, and when that gentleman, who was very much touched by the sight of the old man's altered expression, and wandering eyes, and strange twitching face, was left alone with him, he asked hurriedly, but earnestly, for news of the girls, his nieces, and seemed much relieved when he heard they were well and happy. To Marian her husband's manner was wonderfully altered. He was kind always, occasionally affectionate, but he seemed to have lost all that utter trust, that reliant worship, which had so characterised his attentions to her in the early days of their marriage. Of the election he spoke freely, expressing his sorrow for the disappointment which his friends would suffer owing to his forced defection, and his pleasure that, since a representative of opposite politics must necessarily be chosen, the town would have the advantage of returning a man with the high character which he had heard on all sides ascribed to Mr. Joyce. When, on the evening of the nomination day, Mr. Teesdale waited on his chief, and detailed to him all that had taken place, dwelling on the mention which Joyce had made of his absent opponent, and the high opinion which he had expressed of him, the old gentleman was very much moved, and sank back on his pillows perfectly overcome. Marian by no means appreciated Mr. Teesdale that evening, and got rid of him as soon as possible. She was much pained at the display of what she considered her husband's weakness, and de-

termined on following Dr. Osborne's advice as to removing him as soon as he was able to travel. It was noted just at that time that Mrs. Creswell spoke far more favourably of her husband's state of health than she had done for some time previously, and betrayed an unmistakable desire to get him away from Brocksopp neighbourhood and influences without delay.

When Dr. Osborne was consulted on the matter, he said that as the election, which was the greatest risk of excitement for his patient, had now passed by, it would depend greatly on Mr. Creswell's own feelings and wishes as to whether he should leave his home. A change would most probably be beneficial; but the doctor knew that his old friend had always been wedded to his home, and had a great aversion to being away from it when no absolute necessity for his absence existed. However, Mr. Creswell, when appealed to, seemed to have lost any vivid interest in this as in all other matters of his life. He answered, mechanically, that he would do just as they thought best, that he had no feeling one way or the other about it, only let them decide. He said this in the wearied tone which had now become habitual to him; and he looked at them with dim, lustreless eyes, out of which all expression seemed to have faded. Dr. Osborne tried to rouse him, but with such little success that he began to think Mr. Creswell's malady must have made rapid progress; and he took an early opportunity of submitting him to another examination.

Marian was not aware of this. She met the doctor coming out of her husband's room. They were on semi-friendly terms now, and she said to him—

"I was coming to you, doctor, this afternoon. I have just settled to take Mr. Creswell away for a few weeks, but of course I wanted you to see him before he went. And now you have seen him?"

"Yes; I have just left him."

"And what do you say?"

"I say that he must not be moved, Mrs. Creswell; that he must remain here at home, with every comfort that he may require, and that he must be carefully watched and tended by us all."

"Do you find him changed—for the worse? I thought myself that I had noticed during the last few days—— Do you apprehend any immediate danger?"

"He is very much changed for the worse; the disease has made great progress, and if he were suddenly disturbed or excited I would not answer for the consequences."

"I did right, then, in refusing Mr. Teesdale access to him, yesterday. There is some disputed election account, and Mr. Teesdale was most urgent to see Mr. Creswell, but I thought it better to prevent him."

"You did perfectly right; he must be denied to everybody save those immediately around him, and all matters of business and anything likely to excite or worry him in the least must be studiously kept from him."

They were descending the stairs as the doctor spoke, and in the hall they found Mr. Teesdale, who had just ridden up in hot haste, and was parleying with one of the servants. He took off his hat when he saw Mrs. Creswell and the doctor, and was about to speak, but Marian was before him—"I hope you are not again wishing to see my husband, Mr. Teesdale, as I shall be compelled again to refuse you! Dr. Osborne here will tell you that I am acting in accordance with his strict orders." And the doctor then repeated to the agent all that he had just said to Marian.

"It's an uncommonly vexatious thing," said Mr. Teesdale, when the doctor had concluded: "of course it can't be helped, and whatever you say must be attended to, but it's horribly annoying."

"What is it?" asked Dr. Osborne.

"A matter of Ramsay's, that truculent brute of a fellow who holds the White Farm down Helmingham way. He's made a claim that I know the chief wouldn't acknowledge, and that consequently I daren't pay; though, knowing the fellow as I do, I'm not sure it wouldn't be safest and best in the long run."

"Why don't you act on your own responsibility, then?"

"Not I. The chief had a throw-up with this man before, and declared he would never give in to him again. He's an ill-conditioned scoundrel, and vows all kind of vengeance if he isn't paid."

"My good friend," said the doctor, "you and I know pretty well that Mr. Creswell is able to laugh at the threatened vengeance of a person like this Mr. Ramsay. I must not have my patient disturbed for any such matters. Carry on the business yourself, Teesdale. I know what trust Mr. Creswell places in you, and I know how well it is deserved."

"Then I shall tell Mr. Ramsay to go to——"

"Exactly," said the doctor, interrupting. "You could not consign him to more fitting company."

On the evening of the second day from this colloquy, Marian returned from a long drive in her pony carriage, during which her thoughts had been of anything but a cheerful character. She had been suffering from that horrible sinking of heart which comes sometimes, we know not why, bringing with it the impression that something, we know not what, save that it is unpleasant, is impending over us. When she alighted, she inquired whether Mr. Creswell had rung for anything, and whether Dr. Osborne had called, and received answers in the negative in both cases. A letter marked "immediate" had come for master, that was all. A letter! Where was it? Mr. Barlow, the butler, had taken it up to master's room, the valet being out. Marian heard of the arrival of this letter with a strange sense of fear, and hurried up to her husband's room.

She entered noiselessly and advanced quickly to the bed. Mr. Creswell was lying back, his hands clasped in front of him, his eyes closed, his face very gray and rigid. She thought at first that he was dead, and half screamed and called him by his name, but then, without speaking, without looking, he unclasped his hands, pointed to a folded paper on the coverlet, and then resumed his former position. The letter! She took it up and read it eagerly. It was dated from the White Farm, and signed John Ramsay. It commenced with setting forth his claims to money which was due to him, and which he knew would have been paid "had the squire been about," and it proceeded to revile Mr. Teesdale, and to declare that he was robbing his employer, and "feathering his own nest." The last paragraph ran thus—

"And you must be sharp and get about again, squire, and look to your own. You are bamboozled and cheated in every way right under your nose, in your own house, by your own wife. Why, it's common talk in the town how you was done in the election by Mrs. C. She had young Joyce for a sweetheart long before she knew you, when he was a school usher, and gave him the sack and threw him over when she wanted you and your money, which she always hankered after, and took on with him again when she saw him down here, and got that old thief Osborne, which overcharges the poor for his beastly drugs, to square it and keep you out of the fun."

As Marian read and re-read this paragraph she turned sick at heart and thought she should have fainted, but was recalled to herself by a cold clammy touch on her wrist, and looking down she saw her husband's eyes open and his lips moving. Standing over him she heard him say—"Is it true?"

"True! how can you ask me such a question? I swear it is not."

"No, no, not the last part of course! but any of it?

That young man—was he fond of you—were you engaged?"

A bright flush suffused her face, but she answered steadily, "We were."

"And what made you break with him? Why did you quarrel? You don't answer. Is the letter right? Did you give him up for me? Did you let my position, my money, weigh more with you than his love and his heart? Did you do this?"

"And suppose I did—what then?" said Marian, with flashing eyes—"are you here to plead his cause? Have I not been a dutiful and a proper wife to you? You yourself have just spoken of this vile slander with the scorn it deserves! Of what then do you complain?"

"Of nothing. I complain of nothing, save perhaps of your ignorance of me! Ah, good heavens! did you know me so little as to think that your happiness was not my aim, not so much my own? Did you not know that my love for you was so little selfish, that if I had had the least dream of your engagement to this young man, I should have taken such delight in forwarding it and providing for you both? You would have been near me still, you would have been a daughter to me, and—— Lift me up! the cordial—quick!" and he fell back in a faint.

Dr. Osborne was sent for, and came at once, but it was plain to all that Mr. Creswell's end was at hand. He had two severe paroxysms of pain, and then lay perfectly still and tranquil. Marian was sitting by his bedside, and in the middle of the night she felt his hand plucking at the sleeve of her gown. She roused herself and looked at him. His eyes were open, and there was a bright, happy expression on his thin face. His mind was wandering far away, back to the early days of his poverty and his struggles, and she who had shared both was with him. He pulled Marian to him, and she leaned eagerly forward; but it was not of her he was thinking. "Jenny!" he

said, and his tongue reverted to the old familiar dialect which it had not used for so many years—"Jenny! coom away, lass! Taim's oop!—that's t' mill bell ringin'! Thou'rt a brave lass, and we've had hard taim of it; but we're near t' end now! Kiss me, Jenny! Always good and brave, lass—always——" And so he died.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FOR ONCE GERTRUDE TAKES THE LEAD.

THE lives of the two girls at Lady Caroline's were so completely happy, that they were induced to doubt whether they had ever really lived before. The difference between their rackety, disorderly, Bohemian existence while their father was alive, the pinched and poverty-stricken home which they shared with their mother until her death, and the refined comforts and luxuries which awaited them at their uncle's, was, of course, very great. But they were too young to feel it at the time, and they had come to look upon Woolgreaves as their home, and until Marian Ashurst entered upon it as its mistress, as an epitome of everything that was charming. Lady Caroline's house was much smaller than Woolgreaves; her income, probably, was nothing like their uncle's; and yet about her house and her servants, her carriage, and everything she had, there was a stamp of refinement and of good taste, springing from high breeding, such as they had never witnessed, even under Mrs. Creswell's *régime;* and whatever other fault the girls found with Mrs. Creswell, they invariably allowed her the possession of good taste. And Lady Caroline herself was so different, so

immeasurably superior to any woman they had ever seen. With the exception of Lady Churchill, they had known no one save the village people and the wives of the principal manufacturers at Brocksopp, who had been daughters of other principal manufacturers at Shuttleworth and Combcardingham, and might have been made in one mould, or punched out of one piece; and Lady Churchill was a stupid old woman in a brown front, who, as Gertrude knew, said "obleege," and "apurn" for apron, and "know-ledge," and nearly drove you mad by the way in which she stared at you, and rubbed her nose with a knitting-needle, while you were attempting to find conversation for her. But, in the girls' eyes, Lady Caroline was perfection; and it would have been indeed odd had they not thought her so, as, for reasons best known to herself, she went in more determinedly to make herself agreeable to them than she had done to any one for some years previous.

One reason was that she liked the girls, and was agreeably disappointed in them; had expected to find them provincial *parvenues*, thrown upon her by their quarrel with a person of similar position and disposition with themselves, and had found them quiet lady-like young women, unpretentious, unobtrusive, and thoroughly grateful to her for the home which she had offered them in their time of need. From the step which she had taken so chivalrously Lady Caroline never shrank, but she told the girls plainly, in the presence of Mr. Joyce, that she thought it highly desirable that the fact of their being there as her guests should be officially made known to Mr. Creswell, to whom every consideration was due. As to Mrs. Creswell, there was no necessity to acknowledge her in the matter; but Mr. Creswell was not merely their nearest blood relation, but, until adverse influences had been brought to bear upon him, he had proved himself their most excellent friend; and even at the last, so far as Lady Caroline could

gather from Gertrude, had made some feeble kind of fight against their leaving his house. Mr. Joyce and the girls themselves were also of this opinion, Gertrude jumping at the prospect of any reconciliation with "dear old uncle," but avowing her determination to have nothing more to do with "that horrid madam;" and it was on Maude's suggestion, backed by Walter, that the services of Mr. Gould were employed for mediatory purposes. This was just before the election, and Mr. Gould declared it was utterly impossible for him to attend to anything that did not relate to blue and yellow topics; but a little later he wrote a very kind letter, announcing Mr. Creswell's illness, and deploring the strict necessity for keeping from the old gentleman any subjects of an exciting nature.

The corroboration of this bad news was brought to the little household in Chesterfield Street by Mr. Benthall, who, about that time, ran up to London for a week, and, it is needless to say, lost very little time in presenting himself to Miss Gertrude. The relations between the Helmingham schoolmaster and Gertrude Creswell were, of course, perfectly well known to Lady Caroline through Walter Joyce, who had explained to her ladyship that the causeless exclusion of Mr. Benthall from Woolgreaves had been the means of bringing about the final domestic catastrophe, and had led more immediately than anything else to the departure of the young ladies from their uncle's house. So that Lady Caroline was predisposed in the clergyman's favour, and the predisposition was by no means decreased when she made his acquaintance, and found him to be one of the Shropshire Benthalls, people of excellent family (a fact which always has immense weight with other people who can make the same boast), and essentially a man of the world and of society. A girl like Gertrude Creswell, who, charming though she was, was clearly nobody, might think herself lucky in getting a man of family to marry her.

Of course, Mrs. Creswell could not understand that kind of thing, and took a mere pounds, shillings, and pence view of the question; but Mrs. Creswell had no real dominion over her husband's nieces, and as that husband was now too ill to be appealed to, and the girls were staying under her chaperonage, she should, in the exercise of her discretion, give Mr. Benthall full opportunity for seeing as much of Gertrude as he chose.

Lady Caroline did not come to this determination without consulting Walter Joyce, and Walter did not express his opinion without consulting Maude Creswell, of whose clear head and calm common sense he had conceived a high opinion. The joint decision being favourable, Mr. Benthall had a very happy holiday in London, finding, if such a thing were possible, his regard for Gertrude increased by the scarcely hidden admiration which the bright complexion, pretty hair, and trim figure of the country girl evoked from the passers-by in the public places to which he escorted her. Indeed, so completely changed by an honest passion for an honest girl was this, at one time, selfish and calculating man of the world, that he was most anxious to marry Gertrude at once, without any question of settlement or reference to her uncle, declaring that, however Mrs. Creswell might now choose to sneer at it, the school income had maintained a gentleman and his wife before, and could be made to do so again.

Mr. Benthall spoke with such earnestness, that Joyce conceived a much higher opinion of him than he had hitherto entertained, and would have counselled Lady Caroline to lend her aid to the accomplishment of the schoolmaster's wish, had it not been for Maude, who pointed out that in such a case a reference was undoubtedly due to their uncle, no matter what might be his supposed state of health. If he were really too ill to have the matter submitted to him, and an answer—which, of course, would be unfavourable—were to be received from

Mrs. Creswell, they might then act on their own responsibility, with the feeling that they had done their duty towards the old gentleman, and without the smallest care as to what his wife might say.

This view of Maude's, expressed to Joyce with much diffidence, at once convinced him of its soundness, and a little conversation with those most interested showed them the wisdom of adopting it.

Mr. Benthall wrote a straightforward manly letter to Mr. Creswell, asking consent to his marriage with Gertrude. The day after its despatch, Maude the impassible, who was reading the *Times*, gave a suppressed shriek, and let the paper fall to the ground. Joyce, who was sitting close by talking to Lady Caroline, picked it up, and read in it the announcement of Mr. Creswell's death.

Of course this news caused an indefinite postponement of the marriage. The two girls grieved with deep and heartfelt sorrow for the loss of the kind old man. All little differences of the past few months were forgotten. Marian had no part in their thoughts, which were all of the early days, when, two miserable little orphans, they were received at Woolgreaves, at once put into the position of daughters of the house, and where their every wish was studied and gratified.

Gertrude's grief was especially violent, and she raved against the hard fate which had separated them from their uncle at a time when they would have so much wished to have been near him to minister to and nurse him.

Evidence soon came that Mr. Creswell's sense of what was honourable and right had prevented him from allowing any recent events to influence his intentions towards his nieces. In his will they were mentioned as "my dearly loved Maude and Gertrude, daughters of my deceased brother Thomas, who have been to me as my own daughters during the greater part of their lives;" and to

each of them was left the sum of ten thousand pounds on their coming of age or marriage. There were a few legacies to old servants and local charities, five hundred pounds each to Dr. Osborne and Mr. Teesdale, his two executors, and "all the rest of my property, real and personal, of every kind whatsoever, to my beloved wife Marian."

"And my beloved wife Marian will have about fifteen thousand a year, as near as I can fix it," said Mr. Teesdale, as he left Woolgreaves, after the reading of the will; "and if the railway people take that twenty acres off that infernal Jack Ramsay's farm, about a couple of thou' more!"

It was not to be supposed that Mr. Benthall professed himself indifferent to the splendid legacy which Gertrude had inherited. As he had been willing and anxious to take her for herself, and to share what he had with her, so he was very much pleased to find that their future would be rendered considerably less anxious, and more comfortable than they had anticipated, and in his honest open-hearted way he did not scruple to say so.

The death of their uncle did not make any difference in the course of the girls' lives. They still remained with Lady Caroline, whose regard for them seemed to increase daily; and it was understood that they would continue to inhabit Chesterfield Street until Gertrude was married, and that after that event Maude would frequently return there, making it her London home, and visiting it whenever she was not staying with her sister. So at least Lady Caroline proposed, and begged Mr. Benthall to make the suggestion to Maude at the first convenient opportunity. The opportunity occurred very shortly, and arose from Maude's saying, when they were sitting together one morning—

"I saw Mr. Joyce yesterday, George, and took occasion to ask his advice on that matter."

"And what might that matter be, Maude? There are

so many matters of importance on just now, that you must be more definite."

"It is well Gertrude is not here to hear you! In your present condition there should be only one matter of any importance to you, and that of course is——"

"Our marriage—to be sure! Well, you asked Joyce—what a wonderful fellow he is, by the way; his parliamentary business does not seem the least to have interfered with his writing, and with it all he seems to find time to come up here two or three times a week."

"He has the highest regard for Lady Caroline, and the greatest respect for her judgment," said Maude.

"Naturally, so have we all," said Mr. Benthall, with a gradually spreading smile.

"Yes; but Mr. Joyce consults her in—how ridiculous you are, George! you're always saying stupid things and forgetting your subject. What were we talking about?"

"I like that; and you talk about forgetfulness! You were saying that you had spoken to Mr. Joyce about my marriage, though why you should have——"

"Don't be tiresome, you know what I mean! He perfectly agrees with you in thinking there is no necessity for postponing the marriage any further. Poor uncle has now been dead three months, and you have no necessity to consider whether Mrs. Creswell might think it too soon after that event or not!"

"We have no reason to be bound by what she would say, but I think it would be only right in Gertrude to write and tell her that the wedding is about to take place."

"That you and Gertrude must settle between you. For my part, I should not think of—— However, I confess my judgment is not to be relied on when that person is in question." Then she added in a low voice, and more as if speaking to herself, "How strange it will seem to be away from Gerty!"

Benthall heard the remark, and he took Maude's hand as he said, "But you won't be away from her, dear Maude! We have all of us talked over your future, and Gertrude and I hope you will make your home with us, though Lady Caroline insists on claiming you for some portion of the year."

"You are all of you very good, George," said Maude; "you know how much I should love to be with you and Gerty, and what gratitude and affection I have for Lady Caroline. But I don't think the life you have proposed would exactly suit me."

"Not suit you, Maude?" cried Mr. Benthall in astonishment; "why, what would you propose to do?"

"I cannot say exactly, though I have some ideas about it which I can't clearly express. You see I shall never be married, George—don't laugh at me, please, I'm speaking quite seriously—and there is this large sum of money which uncle left me, and which I don't think should be either squandered away or left lying idle!"

"Why, my dear, what on earth do you propose to do with the money?" asked practical Mr. Benthall.

"To put it to some good use, I hope; to use it and my own time and services in doing good, in benefiting those who need it——"

"You're not going to give it to the missionaries, or any rubbish of that kind, I trust," interrupted Mr. Benthall. "Look here, Maude, depend upon it—— Oh! here's her ladyship, don't say a word about it before her. Good morning, Lady Caroline! This young lady and I have been discussing the propriety of writing to Mrs. Creswell announcing Gertrude's approaching marriage."

"I don't think there can be a doubt as to the propriety of such a course," said Lady Caroline. "Of course, whatever she might say about it would not make the slightest difference to us."

"Of course not."

"But I don't think you need fear any disagreeables. Mrs. Creswell is in a very different position now from that which she held when she thought fit to behave badly to those young ladies, and their relations with her are also quite altered. And by all accounts she is quite sufficient woman of the world to understand and appreciate this."

Lady Caroline was right. In reply to Gertrude's letter announcing her marriage, came a most affectionate note from Marian to her "dearest Gertrude," congratulating her most heartily; complimenting her on her choice of a husband; delighting in the prospect of their living so near to her; hoping to see much of them; regretting that her recent bereavement prevented her being present at the ceremony, or having it take place, as she should so much have wished, at Woolgreaves; and begging permission to send the enclosed, as her contribution, to aid in the setting up of the new household; and the enclosure was a cheque for three hundred pounds.

Mr. Benthall winced a little when he saw the cheque, and Mr. Joyce gave a very grim smile when his friend informed him of the affair; but advised Mr. Benthall to pocket the money, which Mr. Benthall did. As has been said, he did not pretend to despise money; but he was essentially a gentleman in his notions as to the acceptance of favours. He had thought several times about that conversation with Maude, in which she had mentioned the manner in which she had wished to dispose of her fortune and her future. This had caused Mr. Benthall some uneasiness; he had no hankering after his future sister-in-law's fortune; there was nothing he would have liked so much as to see her happily married; but he did not like the idea of the money being foolishly invested in useless charity or gotten hold of by pseudo-philanthropists. A conversation which he had with Gertrude a few days before their marriage seemed, however, to do away with all his fears, and render him perfectly easy in his mind

on this point. A short conversation which ended thus—

"And you're sure of it, Gerty?"

"Positive! I've thought so a long time—now I'm sure! And you must be a great goose, George, not to have noticed it yourself."

"I am not a great goose, and I certainly had some suspicions at one time; but—— Well, now, that would be highly satisfactory."

"Do you think there is anything remaining from—from the other one, George?"

"From the other one? You mean from Mrs.—— Not the remotest thought of her even."

"Well, then, it rests with him entirely. Wouldn't it be nice for them both?"

"It would, indeed—and for us too. Well, we'll see what can be done."

Enigmatical, but apparently satisfactory.

So George Benthall and Gertrude Creswell were married at St. James's Church in Piccadilly, by the Reverend John Bontein, a High-Church rector of a Worcestershire parish, and an old college chum of the bridegroom's. A very quiet wedding, with Maude as the sole bridesmaid, and Joyce as best man, and Lady Caroline, and, oddly enough, Lord Hetherington, who had just come up to town from Westhope, and, calling at his sister's, had learned what was going to take place, and thought he should like to see it, don't you know? Had never been at any wedding except his own, and didn't recollect much about that, except that—curious thing, never should forget it—when he went into the vestry to sign his name, or something of that kind, saw surplice hanging up behind the door—thought it was ghost, or something of that kind—give you his word! So the little earl arrived the next morning at eleven at the church, and took his place in a

pew near the altar, and propped his ear up with his hand to listen to the marriage service, at which he seemed to be much affected. When the ceremony was over, he joined the party in the vestry, insisted on bestowing a formal salute upon the bride—Lady Hetherington, he knew, was safely moored at Westhope—and, as some recompense for the infliction, he clasped on Gertrude's arm a very handsome bracelet, as his bridal gift. No bells, no bishop, no fashionable journal's chronicler, minutely noting down all that took place, and chronicling the names of "distinguished persons present." Pew-opener and beadle hearing "my lord" and "her ladyship" mentioned, seeing broughams, and cockades, and other signs of aristocracy with which they are familiar, are unable to reconcile the presence of these with absence of outward and visible signs in which great ones of this earth delight; and conclude either that it is a runaway match winked at by a portion only of the family, or some such low affair as the union of the tutor with the governess, kindly patronised by their employers. A happy wedding, though—happier far than most which are made up in that same temple—love-match founded on long knowledge of each other, not hurried, not forced, not mercenary; no question of love in a cottage either, and the flight of Amor through the window concurrently with the entrance of the wicked man of the drama—one Turpis Egestas—through the door.

Such a marriage promised to prove a happy one. In its early days, of course, everything was rose-coloured—those days when Maude went down to stay with George and Gertrude at the school, and when, a little later, Walter Joyce ran down for the Easter holidays to his old quarters. He was glad of the chance of seeing them once again, he said, and determined to avail himself of it; and then George Benthall looked in his face and smiled knowingly. Walter returned the grin, and added: "For it's a chance *that* may not happen to me again." And when his friend

looked rather blank at this, and asked him what he meant, Joyce laughed again, and finally told him that Lord Hetherington had just had a piece of patronage fall to his share —the rectory of Newmanton-by-Perringden, a lovely place in the Isle of Wight, where the stipend was not sufficiently great to allow a man with a large family to live on it, but the exact place for a parson with a little money of his own. And Lord Hetherington had inquired of Joyce whether his friend, that remarkably pleasant fellow,—bless my soul, forget my own name next! him we saw married, don't you know?—whether he was not exactly the sort of fellow for this place, and would he like it? Walter thought that he was and he would; and Lord Hetherington, knowing Joyce was going down to see his friend, bid him inquire, and if all were straight, assure Mr. Benthall that the living was his.

And this was how Walter Joyce executed his commission, and this was how George Benthall heard this most acceptable news.

"By the way, what made you grin, Benthall, when I said I had come down here for my holiday to look at my old quarters?" asked Walter.

"Because I thought there might be yet another reason which you had not stated. Anxiety to see some one here!"

"Anxiety is the wrong word. Strong wish to see you and your wife again, and——"

"My wife and I are out of the affair! Come, confess!"

"I give you my honour I don't know what you mean."

"Likely enough; but I'm older than you, and, parson though I am, I declare I think I've seen more of the world. Shall I tell you what brought you down here? I shall!—then I will!—to see Maude Creswell."

"Maude Creswell! What on earth should I—what—why—I mean—what, is Miss Creswell gone?"

"Simply the woman who thinks more about you than

any other creature on earth. Simply the girl who is raving—head over ears in love with you. Don't pretend you don't know it. Natural instinct is too strong to allow any doubt upon that point."

"I swear you surprise me beyond belief! I swear that—— Do you mean this, Benthall?"

"As a gentleman and a Christian, I've told you what I believe; and as a man of the world, I tell you what I think, whether wittingly or unwittingly, you are very far gone in returning the young lady's sentiments!"

"I—that is—there's no doubt she is a girl of very superior mind, and—by Jove, Benthall, you've given a most singular twist to my holiday!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

LADY CAROLINE ADVISES ON A DELICATE SUBJECT.

The communication which Mr. Benthall, in his bluff off-hand manner, had made to Walter Joyce, had surprised the latter very much and embarrassed him not a little. Ever since the receipt of Marian Ashurst's letter announcing her intention of marrying Mr. Creswell—ever since the subsequent interview with Lady Caroline, in which she counselled him to discharge the subject from his mind, to encourage new hopes, and to cultivate aspirations of a different kind—Joyce had lived absolutely free from any influence of "the cruel madness of love, the poison of honey flowers, and all the measureless ill." All his thoughts had been given up to labour and ambition, and, with the exception of his deep-rooted and genuine regard for Lady Caroline, and his friendly liking for the Creswell

girls, he entertained no feeling for any woman living, unless a suspicion of and an aversion to Marian Creswell might be so taken into account. Had he this special partiality for Maude Creswell, of which Benthall had spoken so plainly? He set to work to catechise himself, to look back through the events of the past few months, noting what he remembered of their relations to each other.

Yes, he had seen a great deal of Maude; he remembered very frequent occasions on which they had been thrown together. He had not noticed it at the time; it seemed to come naturally enough. Gertrude, of course, was engaged with Benthall when he was in town—in writing to him or thinking of him when he was away—and Lady Caroline had to go through all the hard work which fell upon a great lady in society—work the amount of which can only be appreciated by those who have performed it or seen it performed. So that, as Joyce then recollected, he and Maude had been thrown a great deal together, and, as he further recollected, they had had a great many discussions on topics very far removed from the mere ordinary frivolity of society talk; and he had noticed that she seemed to have clear ideas which she understood how to express. What an odd thing, that—what Benthall said—had never struck him before! It must have been patent to other people, though; and that put the matter, unpleasantly, in rather a ridiculous light. After all, though, what was there ridiculous in it? Maude was a very handsome girl, a clever girl, and an unmistakable lady. What a pretty, slight, girlish figure she had!—such a graceful outline!—her head was well posed upon her neck! And Joyce smiled as he found himself drawing lines in the air with the paper-knife which he had been idly tossing in his hand.

And he had Benthall's assurance that the girl cared for him—that was something. Benthall was a man careful

in the extreme as to what he said, and he would not have made such a statement where a girl was concerned, and that girl his own sister-in-law, unless he was tolerably certain of being right. His own sister-in-law; he had it then, of course, from Gertrude, who was Maude's second self, and would know all about it. It was satisfactory to know that there was a woman in the world who cared for him, and though without the smallest particle of vanity he accepted the belief very readily, for his rejection by Marian Ashurst and the indignity which he had suffered at her hands had by no means rendered him generally cynical or suspicious of the sex. Marian Ashurst! what an age ago it seemed since the days when the mention of that name would have sent the blood flowing in his cheek, and his heart thumping audibly, and now here he was staying in the old house where all the love scenes had taken place, walking round the garden where all the soft words had been spoken, all the vows made which she had thrown to the winds when the last parting, with what he then and for so long afterwards thought its never-to-be-forgotten agony, had occurred, and he had not felt one single extra palpitation. Mrs. Creswell was staying away from Woolgreaves just then, at some inland watering-place, for the benefit of her health, which it was said had suffered somewhat from her constant attendance on her husband, or Joyce might have met her. Such a meeting would not have caused him an emotion. When he had encountered her in the lane, during the canvassing time, there was yet lingering within his breast a remembrance of the great wrong she had done him, and that was fanned into additional fury by the nature of her request and the insolence with which she made it. But all those feelings had died out now, and were he then, he thought, to come across Marian Creswell's path, she would be to him as the merest stranger, and no more.

If he were to marry, he knew of no one more likely to

suit him in all ways than Maude. Pretty to look at, clever to talk to, sufficiently accustomed to him and his ways of life, she would make him a far better wife than nine-tenths of the young ladies he was accustomed to meet in such little society as he could spare the time to cultivate. Why should he marry at all? He answered the question almost as soon as he asked it. His life wanted brightening, wanted refining, was at present too narrow and confined; all his hopes, thoughts, and aspirations were centred on himself. He was all wrong. There should be some one who—the chambers were confoundedly dreary too, when he came home to them from the office or the House; he should travel somewhere abroad when the House rose, he thought, and it would be dull work moving about by himself, and—

What pretty earnest eyes Maude had, and shining hair, and delicate "bred"-looking hands! She certainly was wonderfully nice, and if, as Benthall avowed, she really cared for him, he—— Who was this coming to break in on his pleasant day-dream? Oh, Gertrude.

"I was wondering where you were, Mr. Joyce! You said you wanted your holiday, and you seem to be passing it in slumber!"

"Nothing so commonplace, Mrs. Benthall."

"One moment, why do you call me Mrs. Benthall? What has made you so formal and ridiculous all of a sudden? You used to call me Gertrude, in London?"

"Yes, but then you were an unmarried girl; now you are a wedded woman, and there's a certain amount of respect due to matronhood."

"What nonsense! Do call me Gertrude again, please; Mrs. Benthall sounds so horrid! I should like the boarders here in the house to call me Gertrude, only George says it wouldn't be proper! And so you weren't asleep?"

"Not the least bit! Although I'm ready to allow I was dreaming."

"Dreaming!—what about?"

"About the old days which I spent in this place—and their association!"

"Oh yes, I know—I mean to say——"

"No, no, Gertrude, say what you had on your lips, then! No prevarication, and no hesitation—what was it?"

"No, really, nothing—it is only——"

"I insist!"

"Well, what I mean to say is—of course, people will talk in a village, you know—and we've heard about your engagement, you know, and how it was broken off, and how badly you were treated, and—oh, how silly I was to say a word about it! I'm sure George would be horribly cross if he knew!"

"And did you imagine I was grizzling over my past, cursing the day when I first saw the faithless fair, and indulging in other poetic rhapsodies! My dear Gertrude, it's not a pleasant thing being jilted; but one lives to get over it and forget all about it, even to forgive her whom I believe it is correct to call the false one!"

"Yes, I dare say! In fact, George and Maude both said you didn't think anything about it now, and——"

"Maude! did she know of it too?"

"Oh yes, we all knew of it! The old woman who had been housekeeper, or cook, or something here in the old Ashurst's time, told George, and——"

"What did Maude say about it?" interrupted Joyce.

"She said—I forget what! No! I recollect! she said that—that Mrs. Creswell was just the sort of woman that would fail to appreciate you!"

"That may be taken in two senses—as a compliment or otherwise," said Joyce, laughing.

"I'm sure Maude means it nicely," said Gertrude earnestly. Then added, "By the way, I wanted to talk to you about Maude, Mr. Joyce."

"About Maude!" said Walter. Then thought to himself, "Is it possible that the seeds of match-making are already developing themselves in this three months' old matron?"

"Yes. I don't think George mentioned it to you, but he had a talk with Maude, just before our marriage, about her future. George, of course, told her that our house would be her home, her permanent home I mean; and he gave her the kindest message from Lady Caroline, who bargained that at least a portion of the year should be spent with her."

"What did your sister say to that?"

"Well, she was much obliged and all that; but she did not seem inclined to settle down. She has some horrible notions about duty and that sort of thing, and thinks her money has been given to her to do good with; and George is afraid she would get what he calls 'let in' by some of those dreadful hypocritical people, and we want you to talk to her and reason her out of it."

"I? Why I, my dear Gertrude?"

"Because she believes in you so much more than in anybody else, and is so much more likely to do what you advise her."

"She pays me a great compliment," said Joyce, rising, "and I'll see what's to be done. The first thing, I think, is to consult Lady Caroline, who would be sure to give good advice. I shall see her to-morrow, and I'll——"

"See Lady Caroline to-morrow! I thought you were not going back till Saturday?"

"I've just thought of some special business about which I must see Lady Caroline at once, and I'll mention this at the same time. Now, let us find George. Come for a turn."

They found George and went for their turn, and when their turn was over, and Gertrude was alone with her

husband, she told him the conversation which she had had with Walter Joyce. The schoolmaster laughed heartily.

"'Pon my word, Gerty," he said, "match-making appears to be your forte, born and bred in you! I never believed in the reality of those old dowagers in Mrs. Trollope's novels, until I saw you."

"Well, I declare, George, you are complimentary! old dowagers, indeed! But, seriously, I wish Walter wasn't going to Lady Caroline!"

"Why, what on earth has that to do with it?"

"Well, I mean speaking in Maude's interest!"

"Why, one would think that Lady Caroline was in love with Walter Joyce herself!"

"Exactly!"

"Why—why—you don't think so, my dear?"

"I'm sure so, my dear!"

And, as response, the Reverend George Benthall whistled in a loud and unclerical manner.

When Walter Joyce arrived in Chesterfield Street, he found Lady Caroline was absent—passing the holidays with Lord and Lady Hetherington at Westhope—and, after a little hesitation, he determined to go down there and see her. He had not seen anything of the Hetheringtons since his election: his lordship was occupied with some new fad which kept him in the country, and her ladyship did not care to come to town until after Easter. Lord Hetherington had viewed the progress of his ex-secretary with great satisfaction. His recollections of Joyce were all pleasant; the young man had done his work carefully and cleverly, had always been gentlemanly and unobtrusive, and had behaved deuced well—point of fact, deuced well—brave, and all that kind of thing—in that matter of saving Car'line on the ice. Her ladyship's feelings were very different. She disliked self-made people more than any others, and those who were reckoned clever

were specially obnoxious to her. She had heard much, a great deal too much, of Joyce from Mr. Gould, who, in his occasional visits, delighted in dilating on his recent foeman's abilities, eloquence, and pluck, partly because he respected such qualities wherever he met with them, but principally because he knew that such comments were very aggravating to Lady Hetherington (no great favourite of his); and she was not more favourably disposed towards him, because he had adopted political principles diametrically opposed to those which she believed. But what actuated her most in her ill-feeling towards Mr. Joyce was a fear that, now that he had obtained a certain position, he might aspire to Lady Caroline Mansergh, who, as Lady Hetherington always suspected, would be by no means indisposed to accept him. Hitherto the difference in their social status had rendered any such proceeding thoroughly unlikely. A tutor, or a—what did they call it?—reporter to a newspaper, could scarcely have the impertinence to propose for an earl's sister; but, as a member of Parliament, the man enjoyed a position in society, and nothing could be said against him on that score. There was Lady Violet Magnier, Lord Haughtonforest's daughter. Well, Mr. Magnier sold ribbons, and pocket-handkerchiefs and things, in the City; but then he was member for some place, and was very rich, and it was looked upon as a very good match for Lady Violet. Mr. Joyce was just the man to assert himself in a highly disagreeable manner; he always held views about the supremacy of intellect, and that kind of rubbish; and the more he kept away from them, the less chance he would have of exercising any influence over Lady Caroline Mansergh.

It may be imagined, then, that her ladyship was not best pleased when her sister-in-law informed her that she had had a telegram from Walter Joyce, asking whether he might come down to Westhope to see her on special business, and that she "supposed Margaret had no objection."

Margaret had strong objections, but did not think it politic to say so just then, so merely intimated that she would be happy to see Mr. Joyce whenever he chose to come.

The tone in which this intimation was conveyed was so little pleasing to Lady Caroline, that she took care to impress on her sister-in-law the fact that Joyce's visit was to her, Lady Caroline, and that she had merely mentioned his coming as a matter of politeness to her hostess, which did not tend to increase Lady Hetherington's regard for Walter Joyce.

But the *bien-séances* were never neglected on account of any personal feeling; and when Joyce arrived at the station, he recognised the familiar livery on the platform, and found a carriage in waiting to convey him to Westhope.

During the drive he occupied himself in thinking over the wondrous changes which had taken place since his first visit to that neighbourhood, when, with a wardrobe provided by old Jack Byrne, and a scanty purse supplied from the same source, he had come down in a dependent position, not knowing any of those amongst whom his lot in life was to be passed, and without the least idea as to the kind of treatment he might expect at their hands. That treatment, he knew, would have been very different had it not been for Lady Caroline Mansergh. But for her counsel, too, he would have suffered himself to have remained completely crushed and vanquished by Marian Ashurst's conduct, would have subsided into a mere drudge without energy or hope. Yes, all the good in his life he owed to the friendship, to the kindly promptings of that sweetest and best of women. He felt that thoroughly, and yet it never struck him that in asking her to advise him as to his marriage with some one else, he was committing, to say the least of it, a solecism. The axiom which declares that the cleverest men have the

smallest amount of common sense, has a broader foundation than is generally believed.

On his arrival at Westhope, Joyce was informed by the butler that Lord Hetherington had gone round the Home Farm with the bailiff, and that her ladyship was out driving, but that they would both be home to luncheon, when they expected the pleasure of his company; meanwhile would he walk into the library, where Lady Caroline Mansergh would join him? He went into the library, and had just looked round the room and viewed his old associations—glanced at the desk where he had sat working away for so many hours at a stretch, at the big tomes whence he had extracted the subject-matter for that great historical work, still, alas! incomplete—at the line of Shakespearean volumes which formed Lady Caroline Mansergh's private reading—when the door opened, and Lady Caroline came in. Country air had not had its usual beneficial effect, Joyce thought as he looked at her; for her face was very pale, and her manner nervous and odd. Yet she shook him warmly by the hand, and bade him be seated in her old cheery tone.

"It is very good of you to let me come down here, breaking in upon the rest which I have no doubt you want, and boring you with my own private affairs," said Joyce, seating himself in the window-sill close by the armchair which Lady Caroline had taken.

"It is not very good of you to talk conventionalities, and to pretend that you don't know I have a deep interest in all that concerns you," replied Lady Caroline.

"I have every reason to know it, and my last words were merely a foolish utterance of society talk——"

"Which you always declare to despise, and which you know I detest."

"Quite true; think it unspoken and absolve me."

"I do; but if we are to have what you used to call a 'business talk,' we must have it at once. In half an

hour Lord and Lady Hetherington and the luncheon will arrive simultaneously, and our chance is at an end. And you did not come from London, I suppose, to discuss tenant-right, or to listen to Lady Hetherington's diatribes against servants?"

"No, indeed; with all deference to them, I came to see you, and you alone, to ask your advice, and to take it, which is quite a different thing, as I have done before in momentous periods of my life."

"And this is a momentous period?"

"Undoubtedly—as much, if not more so, than any."

Had she any notion of what was coming? Her pale face grew paler; she pushed back the rippling tresses of her chestnut hair, and her large eyes were fixed on him in grave attention.

"You alone of any one in the world, man or woman, know the exact story of my first love. You knew my confidence and trust, you knew how they were abused. You saw how I suffered at the time, and you cannot be ignorant of what is absolute fact; that to your advice and encouragement I owe not merely recovery from that wretched state, but the position to which I have since attained!"

"Well?"

"That first love fell dead—you know when! Ambition, the passion that supplied its place, was sufficient for a time to absorb all my thoughts, hopes, and energies. But, to a certain extent it has been gratified, and it suffices me no longer. My heart wants some one to love, and turns to one to whom it owes gratitude, but whom it would sooner meet with a warmer feeling. Are you not well, Lady Caroline?"

"Quite well, thanks, and—and interested. Pray go on!"

"To go on is difficult. It is so horrible in a man to have to say that he sees he has awakened interest in a

woman, that she shows all unknowingly to herself, but still sufficiently palpable, that he is the one person in the world to her, that she rejoices in his presence, and grieves at his absence; worst of all, that all, this is pointed out to him by other people——"

Lady Caroline's cheeks flushed as she echoed the words, "Pointed out to him by other people!"

"Exactly. That's the worst of it. However, all this being so, and my feelings such as I have described, I presume I shouldn't be repeating my former error—inviting a repetition of my previous fate—in asking her to be my wife?"

"I—I should think not." The flush still in her cheeks. "Do I know the lady?"

"Do you know her? No one knows her so well!" The flush deeper than ever. "Ah, Lady Caroline, kindest and dearest of friends, why should I keep you longer in suspense? It is Maude Creswell!"

Her face blanched in an instant. Her grasp tightened rigidly over the arm of the chair on which it lay, but she gave no other sign of emotion. Even her voice, though hollow and metallic, never shook as she repeated the name, "Maude Creswell!"

"Yes. Maude Creswell! You are surprised, I see, but I don't think you will blame me for my choice! She is eminently ladylike, and clever, and nice, and——"

"I don't think you could possibly—— What is it, Thomas?"

"Luncheon, my lady."

"Very well. I must get you to go in to luncheon without me, Mr. Joyce; you will find Lord and Lady Hetherington in the dining-room, and I will come down directly. We will resume our talk afterwards."

And she left the room, and walked swiftly and not too steadily up the hall towards the staircase.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

NIGHT AND MORNING.

Both Lord and Lady Hetherington were in the dining-room when Joyce entered, the former with his brown velveteen suit splashed and clay-stained, and his thick boots rich with the spoil of many a furrow (he was bitten with a farming and agricultural mania just then), and the latter calm and collected as Walter ever remembered her. She received the visitor with perfect politeness, expressed in a few well-chosen sentences her pleasure at seeing him again and the satisfaction with which she had learned of his improved position; then, after scanning him with rather a searching glance, she turned to the footman, and asked where was Lady Caroline, and whether she knew luncheon was ready. Joyce replied for the man. Lady Caroline had heard the announcement of luncheon, but had asked him to come in by himself, saying she would follow directly. Her ladyship had gone up to her room, the footman added; he did not think her ladyship was very well. The footman was new to Westhope, or he would have known that the domestics of that establishment were never allowed to think, or at least were expected to keep their thoughts to themselves.

Lady Hetherington of course ignored the footman's remark entirely, but addressed herself to Joyce.

"I hope you did not bring down any ill news for Lady Caroline, Mr. Joyce?"

"Not I, indeed, Lady Hetherington. I merely came to ask her ladyship's advice on—well, on a matter of business."

"In which she was interested?"

"No, indeed! I was selfish enough to lay before her

a matter in which my own interests were alone concerned."

"Ah!" said Lady Hetherington, with a sigh of relief, "I was afraid it might be some business in which she would have to involve herself for other people, and really she is such an extraordinary woman, constituting herself chaperone to two young women who may be very well in their way, I dare say, but whom nobody ever heard of, and doing such odd things, but—however, that's all right."

Her ladyship subsiding, his lordship here had a chance of expressing his delight at his ex-secretary's advancement, which he did warmly, but in his own peculiar way. So Joyce had gone into Parliament; right, quite right, but wrong side, hey, hey? Radicals and those sort of fellows, hey? Republic and that sort of thing! Like all young men, make mistakes, hey, but know better soon, and come round. Live to see him in the Carlton yet. Knew where he picked up those atrocious doctrines—didn't mind his calling them atrocious, hey, hey?—from Byrne; strange man, clever man, deuced clever, well read, and all that kind of thing, but desperate free-thinker. Thistlewood, Wolfestone, and that kind of thing. Never live to see him in the Carlton. No, of course not; not the place for him. Recollect the Chronicles? Ah, of course; deuced interestin', all that stuff that—that I wrote then, wasn't it? Had not made much progress since. So taken up with farmin' and that kind of thing; must take him into the park before he left, and show him some alterations just going to be made, which would be an immense improvement, immense imp—— Oh, here was Lady Caroline!

What did that idiotic footman mean by saying he thought Lady Caroline was not well? She came in looking radiant, and took her seat at the table with all her usual composure. Lady Hetherington looked at her in surprise, and said—

"Anything the matter, Caroline?"

"The matter, Margaret! Nothing in the world. Why?"

"You told Mr. Joyce to come in to luncheon without you, and Thomas said you had gone upstairs. I feared you had one of your faint attacks."

"Thanks for your sympathy. No! I knew Mr. Joyce would be leaving almost directly after luncheon, and I had a letter to write which I want him to be good enough to take to town for me. So I seized the only chance I had and ran off to write it."

"Deuced odd that!" said Lord Hetherington; "here's British post-office, greatest institution in the country. Rowland Hill, and that kind of thing; take your letters everywhere for a penny—penny, by Jove, and yet you'll always find women want fellows to make postmen of themselves, and carry their letters themselves."

"This is a special letter, West," said Lady Caroline. "You don't understand."

"Oh yes, I do," said his lordship with a chuckle, "women's letters all special letters, hey, hey? order to the haberdasher for a yard of ribbon, line to Mitchell's for stalls at the play—all special, hey, Mr. Joyce, hey?"

When luncheon was over Joyce imagined that Lady Caroline would return with him to the library and then renew their conversation. He was accordingly much surprised when she suggested to Lord Hetherington that he should show Mr. Joyce the alterations which were about to be made in the park. His lordship was only too glad to be mounted on his hobby, and away they went, not returning until it was time for Joyce to start for the station. He did not see Lady Hetherington again, but his lordship, in great delight at the manner in which his agricultural discourse had been listened to, was very warm in his adieux, and expressed his hope that they would meet in town. "Politics always laid aside at the dinner-table, Mr. Joyce, hey, hey?"

And Lady Caroline, after bidding him farewell, placed a note in his hand, saying, "This was the letter I spoke of."

He glanced at it and saw it was addressed to himself, and the next instant the carriage started. Addressed to himself! Did she not say at luncheon that she had been writing a note which she wanted him to take to town for her, and—and yet there was the address, Walter Joyce, Esq., in her bold firm hand. There must be an enclosure which he was to deliver or to post.

And then he did what he might have done at first—broke open the seal of the envelope and took out the contents. One sheet of note paper, with these words—

"I think you will be doing rightly in acting as you propose. Miss Creswell is handsome, clever, and exceptionally 'thorough.' From what I have seen of her I should think she would make you an excellent helpmate, and you know I should not say this were I not tolerably certain about it. I may not see you again for a few weeks, as I detest this specially cold spring, and shall probably run away to Torquay, or perhaps even to Nice, but letters to Chesterfield Street will always find me, and I shall always have the warmest and deepest interest in your welfare. Good-bye. C. M."

"She is a woman of extraordinary mental calibre," said Joyce to himself, as he refolded the note and placed it in his pocket. "She grasps a subject immediately, thinks it through at once, and writes an unmistakable opinion in a few terse lines. A wonderful woman! I've no doubt she had made up her mind, and had written that note before she came down to luncheon, though she did not give it to me until just now."

Walter Joyce was wrong. The interval between leaving him and her arrival in the dining-room had been

passed by Lady Caroline on her bed, where she fell, prone, as the door closed behind her. She lay there, her face buried in the pillow, her hands tightly clasped behind her head, her hair escaped from its knot and creeping down her back, her heart beating wildly. Ah, what minutes of agony and humiliation, of disappointment and self-contempt! It had come upon her very suddenly, and had found her unprepared. She had never dared to analyse her feeling for Joyce; knew of its existence, but did not know or would not admit to herself what it was. Tried to persuade herself that it was "interest" in him, but laughed contemptuously at the poor deceit when she found her heart beating double pace as she read of his progress at the election, or her cheek flaming and her lip quivering as she did battle against Lady Hetherington's occasional impertinences about him. Those were the signs of something more than interest—of love, real, unmistakable passion. What a future might it not have been for her? She had respected her first husband for his kindness, his confidence, his equable temper. She would have respected this man too—respected him for his talent, his bravery, his skill and courage with which he had fought the great battle of life; but she would have loved him too—loved him with that wild passion, with that deep devotion. For the first time in her life she had learned what it was to love, and learned it too late. On those few occasions when she had dared to reveal to herself what was hidden in the inmost recesses of her soul, she had come to the conclusion that though the happiness for which she pined would never be realised—and she never concealed from herself the improbability of that—yet she should always hold the first position in his thoughts. The bitter disappointment which he had suffered at Miss Ashurst's hands had, she thought, effectually extinguished all idea of marriage in his mind. And now he came to her—to her of all women in the world—to tell her of his

loneliness, his want of some one to sympathise with and be his companion, and to ask her advice as regarded his selection of Maude Creswell! It was too hard upon her, too much for her to bear this. A score of schemes flashed through her brain. Suppose she were to temporise with this question? A word from her would make Joyce defer taking any steps in the matter for the present, and in the interval she could easily let him see how she—the state of her—— Ah, the shame, the wretched humiliation! Was she bewitched, or was she in sober seriousness—she, Caroline Mansergh, whose pride as Caroline West was a byword—was she going to throw herself at the head of a man who had not only never shown any intention of proposing to her, but had actually come to consult her about his marriage with another woman! It was impossible. *Noblesse oblige.* Lady Caroline West's pride, dormant and overlaid with other passions, yet lived in Lady Caroline Mansergh, and asserted itself in time. She rose from the bed, bathed her face, adjusted her hair, poured some salvolatile in a glass with a shaking hand, and swallowed it through her set teeth, then went down to luncheon, as we have seen. She expressly avoided any chance of future conversation with Walter, and the note was written while he was out with Lord Hetherington.

Of course, Walter Joyce was utterly ignorant of Lady Caroline's feelings. As she hid them from herself as much as possible, it was unlikely that she would suffer him to catch the smallest inkling of them; and it is very questionable whether, had his powers of divination been infinitely stronger than they were, he would have understood them. The one spark of romance with which nature had endowed him had been completely stamped out by Marian Ashurst, and the rest of his organisation was commonplace naturally, and made more commonplace by practical experience of the world. He wondered Lady Caroline had not arranged to have a further talk with

him. She had left him, or rather they had been interrupted just at the critical moment, just when he had told her the object of his visit; and it was odd, to say the least of it, that she did not seek an early opportunity for letting him know her opinion on the really weighty question on which he had consulted her. And yet she always knew best; no doubt she thought it was essential that he should please Lord Hetherington, who was evidently bent on showing him those alterations, and, perhaps, she thought, too, that he might like to have her answer in writing to refer to on occasion. What a capital answer it was! He pulled it out of his pocket, and looked at it again, so clear and concise and positive. His excellent helpmate. Yes, that was what he wanted. How exactly she appreciated him! Running to Torquay or Nice? What a funny thing! He had never heard her complain of being affected by the cold before, and—however she approved of his intentions in regard to Maude Creswell—that was the great point. So ruminated Walter Joyce, the hard-headed and practical, sliding gradually into a hundred other thoughts of work to be done and schemes to be looked into, and people to be seen, with which he was so much engaged that, until he reached London, both Maude and Lady Caroline were fairly obliterated from his mind.

He slept at his chambers that night, and went down to Helmingham the next day. There was a station now at the village, and it was here that Joyce alighted, not merely because it was more convenient than going to Brocksopp, but because it saved him the annoyance of having to run the gauntlet of a walk through the midst of his constituency, every other member of which had a complaint to make or a petition to prefer. The Helmingham people, of course, were immensely impressed by the sight of a man who, originally known to them as pursuing the mysterious profession of a Schoolmaster, had grown into that yet more inscrutable being, a Member of Parliament; but

their wonderment was simply expressed in gaping and staring. They kept their distance peasant-like, and never dreamed of button-holing their member, as did the Brocksoppians. The road that led from the station to the village skirted the wall of the school-garden. It was a low wall, and looking over it, Joyce saw Maude Creswell tying up a creeper which was trained round the study window. Her attitude was pretty, a sunbeam shone on her hatless head, and the exertion given to her task had brought a bright colour to her usually pale face. Never before had she looked so attractive in Joyce's eyes. He dismissed from his mind the interesting question of compulsory education for factory children, which he had been revolving therein for the last hour and a half, and quickened his pace towards the house.

Maude was in the study when he entered. The flush had left her face, but returned when she saw him. He advanced and took her hand.

"So soon back!" she cried. "When I came down yesterday, they told me you had gone to town, and probably would not return; and I was so horribly vexed!"

"Were you? That's kind of you, indeed!"

"Well, you know—I mean——"

"What you say. I believe that firmly, for you have the credit of being quite unconventional. No, I merely went to London on business, and that finished I returned at once. Where is your sister?"

"Out."

"And her husband?"

"How can you ask such a question? With her, of course. They have gone to pay a visit."

"A visit; where? I—I beg your pardon; how very rude of me to ask such a question! What a tell-tale face you have, Miss Cresswell! I saw the rudeness I had committed by your expression."

"You give me credit for more power than I possess.

There was no rudeness in your asking. They have gone to Woolgreaves."

"To Woolgreaves!"

"Yes. Mrs. Creswell called here two days ago—the day you went to London; but Gertrude and George were out, so she left a note stating she was very anxious to see them, and they have gone over there to-day. They had no notion you would have come down, or they would not have gone. I am so sorry they are not here."

"I confess I am not."

"Not sorry! That's not polite. Why are you not sorry?"

"Because I wanted to talk to you."

"To me?"

"Yes, to you. I've something to consult you about, in relation to my recent visit to town; rather a difficult matter, but I have all faith in your good judgment."

"I'm afraid you rate my judgment too highly, Mr. Joyce; but at all events, you may be assured of my answering you honestly, and to the best of my power."

"That is all I ask. That granted, I can make sure of the rest. And really it is not such a great matter after all. Only a little advice; but such advice as only a woman—more than that, only a peculiar kind of woman—can give."

"Do I fulfil the requirements?"

"Exactly."

"Then proceed at once; and I will promise to answer exactly as I think."

"Well, then, I have a friend, about my own age, of sufficiently mean birth, whose father was a man of restricted views and small mind, both cramped and narrowed by the doctrines of the religious sect to which he belonged, but whose mother was an angel. Unfortunately the mother died too soon after the boy's birth to be of much good to him, beyond leaving him the recollection of her

sweet face and voice and influence—a recollection which he cherishes to this day. After his wife's death the boy's father became more and more imbued with the sectarian doctrines, an undue observance of which had already had its effect in his home, and, dying shortly after, left his son almost unprovided for, and friendless, save in such friendship as the lad might have made for himself. This, however, proved sufficient. The master of the school at which the lad attended took great interest in him, half-adopted him as it were, and, when the youth was old enough, took him as his assistant in the school. This would have met my friend's views sufficiently—for he was a plodding, hardworking fellow—had he had no other motive; but he had another: he was in love with the schoolmaster's daughter, and she returned the passion. Am I wearying you with this rigmarole?"

"You know you are not. Please go on!"

"So they proceeded in their Arcadian simplicity, until the schoolmaster died, leaving his wife and daughter unprovided for; and my friend had to go out into the world to seek his fortune—to seek his bread rather, I should say—bread to be shared, as soon as he had found enough of it, with his betrothed. But while he was floundering away, throwing out a grappling-iron here and there, striving to attach himself to something where bread was to be earned, the young lady had a slice of cake offered to her, and, as she had always preferred cake to bread, she accepted it at once, and thought no more of the man who was hunting so eagerly for penny rolls for her sake. You follow me?"

"Yes, yes! Pray go on!"

"Well, I'm nearly at the end of my story! When my friend found that the only person in the world which was dear to him had treated him so basely he thought he should die, and he said he should, but he didn't. He suffered frightfully; he never attempts to deny that, though there was an end of all things for him; that life

was henceforth a blank, and all that sort of thing, for which see the circulating library. And he recovered; he threw himself into the penny-roll hunting with greater vigour than ever, and he succeeded wonderfully. For a time, whenever his thoughts turned towards the woman who had treated him so shamefully, had jilted him so heartlessly, he was full of anger and hopes for revenge, but that period passed away, and the desire to improve his position, and to make progress in the work which he had undertaken, occupied all his attention. Then he found that this was not sufficient; that his heart yearned for some one to love, for some one to be loved by, and he found that some one, but he did not ask her to become his wife!"

"He did not. Why not?"

"Because he was afraid her mind might have been poisoned by some warped story of his former engagement, some——"

"Could he swear to her that his story—as you have told it to me—is true?"

"He could, and he would!"

"Then she would not be worthy of his love if she refused to believe him!"

"Ah, Maude, dearest and best, is there any need to involve the story further; have you not known its meaning from the outset? Heart whole and intact, I offer you my hand, and swear to do my best to make the rest of our lives happy if you take it. You don't answer. Ah, I don't want you to. Thanks, dear, a thousand times for giving me a new, fresh, worthy interest in life!"

"You here, Mr. Joyce? Why, when did you get back?"

"Half an hour since, Gertrude. You did not expect me, I hear!"

"Certainly not, or we shouldn't have gone out. And we did no good after all."

"No good? How do you mean?"

"Oh, madam was out. However, bother madam. Did you see Lady Caroline?"

"I did."

"And did you settle about Maude's staying with us?"

"No."

"Nor about her going to her ladyship's?"

"No."

"Why, what on earth was the use of your going to town? What have you settled?"

"That she's to stay with—me."

"With you?"

"With me."

"Why, you don't mean to say that you're going—that she's going——?"

"I do—exactly that."

"Oh, you dear Walter! I am so delighted! Here, George! What did I say about those three crows we saw as we were driving in the pony-chaise? They did mean a wedding, after all!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MARIAN'S RESOLVE.

To have an income of fifteen thousand a year, and to be her own mistress, would, one would have imagined, have placed Marian Creswell on the pinnacle of worldly success, and rendered her perfectly happy. In the wildest day-dreams of her youth she had never thought of attaining such an income, and such a position as that income afforded her. The pleasures of that position she had only just begun to appreciate; for the life at Woolgreaves, though with its domestic comforts, its carriages and horses and attentive servants, infinitely superior to the life in the Helmingham school-house, had no flavour of the outside world. Her place in her particular sphere was very much elevated, but that sphere was as circumscribed as ever. It was not until after her husband's death that Marian felt she had really come into her kingdom. The industrious gentlemen who publish in the newspapers extracts from the last will and testaments of rich or distinguished persons—thereby planting a weekly dagger in the bosoms of the impecunious, who are led by a strange kind of fascination to read of the enormous sums gathered and bequeathed—had of course not overlooked the testamentary disposition of Mr. Creswell, "of Woolgreaves, and Charleycourt Mills, Brocksopp, cotton-spinner and mill-owner," but had nobly placed him at the head of one of their weekly lists. So that when Mrs. Creswell "and suite," as they were good enough to describe her servants in the local papers, arrived at the great hotel at Tunbridge Wells, the functionaries of that magnificent establishment—great creatures accustomed to associate with the salt of the earth, and having a proper

contempt, which they do not suffer themselves to disguise, for the ordinary traveller—were fain to smile on her, and to give her such a welcome as only the knowledge of the extent to which they intended mulcting her in the bill could possibly have extorted from them. The same kindly feeling towards her animated all the sojourners in that pleasant watering-place. No sooner had her name appeared in the Strangers' List, no sooner had it been buzzed about that she was *the* Mrs. Creswell, whose husband had recently died, leaving her so wonderfully well off, than she became an object of intense popular interest.

Two ladies of title—the widow of a viscount (Irish), and the wife of a baronet (English), insolvent, and at that moment in exile in the island of Coll, there hiding from his creditors—left cards on her, and earnestly desired the pleasure of her acquaintance. The roistering youth of the place, the East India colonels, the gay dogs superannuated from the government offices, the retired business-men, who, in the fallow leisure of their lives, did what they would,—all looked on her with longing eyes, and set their wits to work on all sorts of schemes to compass knowing her. Over the laity the clergy have a great advantage—their mission is in itself sufficient introduction—and lists of all the local charities, district churches to be erected, parsonages to be repaired, and schools to be established, had been presented by those interested in them to the rich widow in person before she had been forty-eight hours in the place.

It was very pleasant, this popularity, this being sought after and courted and made much of, and Marian enjoyed it thoroughly. Unquestionably, she had never enjoyed anything so much in her previous life, and her enjoyment had no alloy. For although just before her husband's death, and for some little time after, she had had certain twinges of conscience as to the part she had acted in leaving him ignorant of all her relations with Walter

Joyce when she married him, that feeling had soon died away. Before leaving home she had had a keen experience of absolute enjoyment in signing cheques with her own name, and in being consulted by Mr. Teesdale as to some business of her estate, and this feeling increased very much during her stay at Tunbridge Wells. Nevertheless, she did not remain there very long; she was pleased at being told that her duties required her at home, and she was by no means one to shirk such duties as the management of an enormous property involved.

So Marian Creswell went back to Woolgreaves, and busied herself in learning the details of her inheritance, in receiving from Mr. Teesdale an account of his past stewardship, and listening to his propositions for the future. It was very pleasant at first; there were so many figures, the amounts involved were so enormous, there were huge parchment deeds to look at, and actual painted maps of her estates. She had imagined that during that period just prior to their marriage, when she made herself useful to Mr. Creswell, she had acquired some notion of his wealth, but she now found she had not heard of a tenth part of it. There was a slate quarry in Wales, a brewery in Leamington, interest in Australian ships, liens on Indian railways, and house property in London. There seemed no end to the wealth, and for the first few weeks, looking at the details of it with her own eyes, or listening to the account of it in Mr. Teesdale's sonorous voice, afforded her real pleasure. Then gradually, and almost imperceptibly, came back upon her that feeling which had overwhelmed her in her husband's lifetime, of which she had gotten rid for some little space, but which now returned with fifty-fold free-questioning, "What is the good of it all?"

What indeed? She sat in the midst of her possessions more lonely than the poorest cotter on any of her estates, —less cared for than the worn-out miner, for whom, after

his day's toil, his wife prepared the evening meal, and his children huddled at his knee. Formerly her husband had been there, with his kindly face and his soft voice, and she had known that, notwithstanding all difference of age and temperament between them, so long as he lived there was one to love her with a devotion which is the lot of few in this world. Now he was gone, and she was alone. Alone! It was a maddening thought to a woman of Marian's condition, without the consolation of religion, without the patience calmly to accept her fate, without the power of bowing to the inevitable. Where money was concerned she could scarcely bring herself to recognise the inevitable, could scarcely understand that people of her wealth should, against their own will, be left alone in this world, and that love, friendship, and all their sweet associations, could not be bought.

Love and friendship! Of the latter she could scarcely be said to have had any experience; for Marian Ashurst was not a girl who made friends, and Mrs. Creswell found no one equal to being admitted to such a bond; and as to the former, though she had enjoyed it once, she had almost forgotten all about it. It came back to her, however, as she thought over it; all the sweet words, the soft endearing epithets, and the loving looks came back to her, all the fond memory of that time when, for a period, the demon of avarice was stilled, the gnawing desire for money, and what money in her idea might bring, was quenched; when she was honestly proud of her lover, happy in the present, and expectant of the future. She recollected the poor dresses and the cheap trinkets which she had in those days; the wretched little presents which she and Walter had exchanged, and the pleasure she experienced at receiving them at his hands. She remembered the locket, with her portrait, which she had given him, and wondered what had become of it. He had it, doubtless, yet, for he had never returned it to her, not

even in that first wild access of rage which he may have felt at the receipt of the letter announcing her intended marriage, nor since, when he had cooled down into comparative carelessness. Surely that argued something in her favour? Surely that showed that he had yet some lingering regard for her? In all that had been told her of him—and specially during the election time she had heard much—no mention had ever been made of any woman to whom he was paying attention. She had thought of that before; she remembered it delightedly now. Could it be that in the secret recesses of his heart there glimmered yet, unquenched, a spark of love for her, the idol of his youth? It was not unlikely, she thought; he was very romantic, as she remembered him—just the sort of man in whom commerce with the world would be insufficient to blot out early impressions, to efface cherished ideals.

Could it be possible that the great crisis in her life was yet to come? That the opportunity was yet to be given her of having wealth and position, and, to share them with her, a husband whom she could love, and of whom she could be proud? Her happiness seemed almost too great; and yet it was there on the cards before her. Forgetting all she had done, and shutting her eyes to the fact that she herself had made an enormous gulf between them, she blindly argued to herself that it was impossible such love as Walter Joyce's for her could ever be wholly eradicated, that some spark of its former fire must yet remain in its ashes, and needed but tact and opportunity on her part to fan it again into a flame. What would not life be, then, were that accomplished? She had been pleased with the notion of entering society as Mr. Creswell's wife (poor prosaic Mr. Creswell!), but as the wife of Walter Joyce, who was, according to Mr. Gould, one of the most rising men of the day, and who would have her fortune at his back to further his schemes and advance his interests, what might

not be done! Marian glowed with delight at this ecstatic day-dream; sat cherishing it for hours, thinking over all kinds of combinations; finally put it aside with the full determination to take some steps towards seeing Walter Joyce at once.

How lucky it was, she thought, that she had behaved amiably on the announcement of Gertrude Creswell's marriage, and not, as she had felt inclined at first to do, returned a savage, or at best a formal, answer! These people, these Benthalls, were just those through whose agency her designs must be carried out. They were very friendly with Walter, and of course saw something of him; indeed, she had heard that he was expected down to stay at Helmingham, so soon as he could get away from London. If she played her cards well—not too openly at first, but with circumspection—she might make good use of these people; and as they would not be too well off, even with the interest of Gertrude's money, if they had a family (and these sort of people, poor parsons and schoolmasters—James Ashurst's daughter had already learned to speak in that way—always had a large number of children), she might be able, in time, to buy their services and mould them to her will.

It was under the influence of these feelings that Marian had determined on being exceedingly polite to the Benthalls, and she regretted very much that she had been away from home at the time when they called on her. She wrote a note to that effect to Mrs. Benthall, and intimated her intention of returning the visit almost immediately. Mrs. Benthall showed the note to her husband, who read it and lifted his eyebrows, and asked his wife what it meant, and why the widow had suddenly become so remarkably attached to them. Mrs. Benthall professed her inability to answer his question, but remarked that it was a good thing that "that" was all settled between Maude and Walter, before Walter came in madam's way again.

"But he isn't likely to come in her way again," said the Reverend George.

"I don't know that," said Gerty; "this sudden friendship for us looks to me very much as though——"

"You don't mean to say you think Mrs. Creswell intends making a convenience of us?" asked Mr. Benthall.

"I think she did so intend," said Gertrude; "but she——"

"We'll have nothing of that sort!" cried Mr. Benthall, going through that process which is known as "flaring up;" "we can get on well enough without her and her presents, and if——"

"Ah, you silly thing," interrupted Gertrude, "don't you see that when Walter marries Maude, there will be an end of any use to which we could be put by Mrs. Creswell, even if we were not going away to the Newmanton living in a very few weeks? You may depend upon it, that as soon as she hears the news—and I will take care to let her know it when she calls here—she will gracefully retire, and during the remainder of our stay in Helmingham we shall see very little more of the rich widow."

On the night of his acceptance by Maude Creswell, Walter wrote a long letter to Lady Caroline. He wrote it in his room—the old room in which he used to sleep in his usher-days: he had bargained to have that when he came down—when all the household was in bed, after an evening passed by him in earnest conversation with Maude and Gertrude, while Mr. Benthall busied himself with an arrangement of affairs consequent upon his giving up the school, which he had decided upon doing at midsummer. In the course of that long conversation Walter mentioned that he was about to write to Lady Caroline, acquainting her with what had taken place, and also told the girls of his having consulted her previous to the step which he had taken. He thought this information, as

showing Lady Caroline's approbation of the match, would be hailed with great delight; and he was surprised to see a look pass between Maude and Gertrude, and to hear the latter say—

"Oh, Walter, you don't mean to say you asked Lady Caroline's advice as to your marrying Maude!"

"Certainly I did; and I'm sure Maude will see nothing strange in it. She knows perfectly well that——"

"It is not for Maude's sake that I spoke; but—but, Walter, had you no idea, no suspicion that——"

"That what, my dear Gertrude? Pray finish your sentence."

"That Lady Caroline cared for you herself?"

"Cared for me!"

"Cared for you! loved you! wanted to marry you! Can I find plainer language than that?"

"Good heavens, child, what nonsense are you talking! There is not the remotest foundation for any such belief. Lady Caroline is my kindest and best friend. If there were no social difference between us, I should say she had behaved to me as a sister; but as for anything else——nonsense, Gertrude!"

Gertrude said no more; she merely shrugged her shoulders and changed the subject. But the effect of that conversation was not lost on Walter Joyce. It showed in the tone of his letter to Lady Caroline written that night, softening it and removing it entirely from the brusque and business-like style of correspondence which he generally indulged in.

The next day he left Helmingham early, having had a stroll with Maude,—in which he expressed his wish that the marriage should take place as soon as possible,—and a short talk with Gertrude, in which, however, he made no reference to the topic discussed on the previous evening.

It was a lucky thing that Mr. Joyce had started by an

early train; for the Benthalls had scarcely finished their luncheon, before there was a violent ringing at the gate-bell,—there was no servant in the county who, for his size, could make more noise than Marian's tiger,—and Mrs. Creswell was announced. She had driven the ponies slowly over from Woolgreaves, and had been enjoying the bows and adulation of the villagers as she came along. Though of course she had driven through the village scores of times, she had never been to the school-house since she left it with her mother on their memorable visit to Woolgreaves, that visit which resulted in her marriage.

She was not an emotional woman, Mrs. Creswell; but her heart beat rather faster than its placid wont as she crossed the threshold of the gate, and stepped at once into the garden, where so many of the scenes of her early history had been passed. There was the lawn, as untidy as in her poor father's days, bordered by the big elm-trees, under whose shadow she had walked in the dull summer evenings, as the hum from the dormitories settled down into silence and slumber; and her lover was free to join her there, and to walk with her until their frugal supper was announced. There were the queer star and pear-shaped flower-beds, the virginia-creeper waving in feathery elegance along the high wall, the other side of which was put to far more practical purposes—bore stucco instead of climbers, and re-echoed to the balls of the fives-players. There were the narrow walks, the old paintless gate-bell, that lived behind iron bars, the hideous stone pine-apples on either side of the door, just as she remembered them.

In the drawing-room, too, where she was received by Mrs. Benthall, with the exception of a smell of stale tobacco, there was no difference: the old paper on the walls, the old furniture, the old dreary outlook.

After the first round of visiting talk, Marian asked Gertrude how she liked her new home.

Gerty was, if anything, frank.

"Well, I like it pretty well," she said. "Of course it's all new to me, and the boys are great fun."

"Are they?" said Marian, with an odd smile; "they must have changed a great deal. I know I didn't think them 'great fun' in my day."

"Well, I mean for a little time. Of course they'd bore one awfully very soon, and I think this place would bore one frightfully after a time, so dull and grim, isn't it?"

"It's very quiet; but you mustn't let it bore you, as you call it."

"Oh, that won't matter much, because it will only be for so short a time."

"So short a time! Are you going to leave Helmingham?"

"Oh yes; haven't you heard? George has got a living—such a jolly place, they say—in the Isle of Wight; Newmanton they call it; and we give up here at midsummer."

"I congratulate you, my dear Gertrude, as much as I bewail my own misfortune. I was looking forward with such pleasure to having you within reachable distance in this horribly unneighbourly neighbourhood, and now you dash all my hopes! Whence did Mr. Benthall get this singular piece of good fortune?"

"George got the presentation from Lord Hetherington, who is a great friend of Wal—I mean of a great friend of ours. And Lord Hetherington had seen George in London, and had taken a fancy to him, as so many people do; and he begged his friend to offer this living to George."

"That is very delightful indeed; I must congratulate you, though I must say I deserve a medal for my selflessness in doing so. It will be charming for your sister, too; she never liked this part of the country much, I think; and of course she will live with you?"

"No, not live with us; we shall see her whenever she can get away from London, I hope."

"From London! ah, I forgot. Of course she will make your friend Lady—Man—Lady Mansergh's her head-quarters?"

"No; you are not right yet, Mrs. Creswell," said Gertrude, smiling in great delight, and showing all her teeth. "The fact is, Maude is going to be married, and after her marriage she will live the greater part of the year in London."

"To be married! indeed!" said Marian—she always hated Maude much worse than Gertrude. "May one ask to whom?"

"Oh, certainly; every one will know it now,—to the new member here, Mr. Joyce."

"Indeed!" said Marian quite calmly (trust her for that!). "I should think they would be excellently matched!—My dear Gertrude, how on earth do you get these flowers to grow in a room? Mine are all blighted, the merest brown horrors."

"Would he prefer that pale spiritless girl—not spiritless, but missish, knowing nothing of the world and its ways—to a woman who could stand by his side in an emergency, and help him throughout his life? Am I to be for ever finding one or other of these doll-children in my way? Shall I give up this last new greatest hope simply because of this preposterous obstacle? Invention too, perhaps, of the other girl's, to annoy me. Walter is not that style of man—last person on earth to fancy a bread-and-butter miss, who—— We will see who shall win in this round. This is an excitement which I certainly had not expected."

And the ponies never went so fast before.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RESULT.

THE second day after Mrs. Creswell's visit to Helmingham, Walter Joyce was sitting in his chambers hard at work. The approaching change in his condition had affected him very little indeed. He had laughed to himself to think how little. He would have laughed more had he not at the same time reflected that it is not a particularly good sign for a man to be so much overwhelmed by business or so generally careless as to what becomes of him, as to look upon his marriage with very little elation, to prepare for it in a very matter-of-fact and unromantic way. That no man can serve two masters we know on the best authority; and there are two who certainly will not brook being served at the same time by the one worshipper, love and ambition. Joyce had been courting the latter deity for many months with unexampled assiduity, and with very excellent success, and, in reality, had never swerved in his allegiance. He was afraid he had; he induced himself to believe that that desire for some one to share his life with him was really legitimate love-prompting, whereas it was much more likely a mere wish, springing from vanity, to have some one always at hand with the censer, some one to play the part of the stage-confidante, and receive all his outpourings while at the same time she was loud in his praises. The love which he felt for Maude Creswell differed as much from the passion with which, in the by-gone years, Marian Ashurst had inspired him, as the thick brown turgid Rhine stream which flows past Emmerich differs from the bright, limpid, diamond-sprayed water which flashes down at Schaffhausen; but there was "body" in it, as there is in the Rhine stream at Emmerich, suf-

ficient to keep him straight from any of the insidious attacks of ambition, as he soon had occasion to prove.

Not that the news which Gertrude Benthall had confided to him in regard to Lady Caroline Mansergh had touched him one whit. In the first place, he thought Gertrude had deceived herself, or, at all events, had misconstrued the feelings by which Lady Caroline was actuated towards him; and in the second—supposing the girl was right, and all was as she believed—it would not have had the smallest influence in altering anything he had done. He was not a brilliant man, Walter Joyce, clever in his way, but lacking in *savoir faire;* but he had a rough odd kind of common sense which stood him in better stead than mere worldly experience, and that showed him that in his true position the very worst thing he could have done for himself would have been to go in for a great alliance. Such a proceeding would have alienated the affections and the confidence of all those people who had made him what he was, or rather who had seen him struggle up to the position he enjoyed, and given him a helping hand at the last. But it was because he had struggled up himself by his own exertions that they liked him, whereas any effort in his favour by the aid of money or patronage would have sent them at once into the opposition ranks. No, Lady Caroline was still the kindest, the dearest, the best of his friends! He found a letter from her on his return to chambers, full of warm congratulations, telling him that she was compelled to follow the medical advice of which she had spoken to him, and to leave London for a few weeks; but she hoped on her return to welcome him and his bride to Chesterfield Street, and retain them ever on the very narrow list of her chiefest intimates. He was engaged on a letter to Jack Byrne when there came a sharp clear knock at the door; such a different knock from that usually given by the printer's boy, his most constant visitor, that he laid down his pen, and called sonorously, "Come in!"

The handle was turned quietly, the door was opened quickly, and Marian Creswell came into the room.

Walter did not recognise her at first; her veil was half over her face, and she was standing with her back to the light. A minute after, he exclaimed, "Mrs. Creswell!"

"Yes, Mr. Joyce; Mrs. Creswell! You did not expect me."

"I did not, indeed. You are, I confess, one of the last persons I should have expected to see in these rooms."

"No doubt; that is perfectly natural; but I come on a matter of business."

"As does every one who favours me with a visit. I cannot imagine any one coming here for pleasure. Pray be seated; take the 'client's chair.'"

"You are very bright and genial, Mr. Joyce; as every successful man is."

"As every man ought to be, Mrs. Creswell; as every tolerably successful man can afford to be."

"I suppose you wonder how I found your address."

"Not the least in the world. Unfortunately I know too well that it is in the archives of the *Post-office Directory*. Behold the painful evidences of the fact!" and he pointed to a table covered with papers. "Petitions, begging-letters, pamphlets, circulars, all kinds of unreadable literature."

"Yes; but I don't study the *Post-office Directory*, as a rule."

"No; but you looked at it to-day, because you had an object in view. Given the object, you will not hesitate to depart in any way from your usual course, Mrs. Creswell."

"I will not pretend to ignore your sarcasm, nor will I say whether it is deserved or undeserved, though perhaps my presence here just now should have induced you to spare me."

"I did not mean to be sarcastic; I simply gave utter-

ance to a thought that came into my mind. You said you came on a matter of business? I must be rude enough to remind you that I am very busy just now."

"I will detain you a very short time; but, in the first place, let us drop this fencing and folly. You know my husband is dead?"

Joyce bowed.

"And that I am left with a large, a very large fortune at my disposal?"

"I heard so, not merely when I was down at Helmingham the other day, but here in London. It is common talk."

"You were down in Helmingham the other day? Ah, of course! However, suppose I had come to you to say——" and she paused.

Joyce looked at her with great composure. "To say!" he repeated.

"I must go through with it," she muttered beneath her breath. "To say that the memory of old days is always rising in my mind, the sound of old words and places always ringing in my ears, the remembrance of old looks almost driving me mad! Suppose I had come to say all this—and this besides—share that fortune with me!"

"To say that to *me!*"

"To you!"

"It is excessively polite of you, and of course I am very much flattered, necessarily. But, Mrs. Creswell, there is one thing that would prevent my accepting your very generous offer."

"And that is——"

"I am engaged to be married."

"I had heard some report of that kind; but, knowing you as I do, I had set very little store by it. Walter Joyce, I have followed your fortunes, so far as they have been made public, for many months, and I have seen how,

step by step, you have pushed yourself forward. You have done well, very well; but there is a future for you far beyond your present, if you but take advantage of the opportunity which I now offer you. With the fortune which I ask you to share with me—a fortune, mind; not a few thousand pounds such as you are anticipating with Maude Creswell, but with a fortune at your back, and your talents, you may do anything; there is no position which might not be open to you."

"You are drawing a tempting picture."

"I am drawing a true one; for in addition to your own brains, you would have those of a woman to aid you: a woman, mind, who has done for herself what she proposes to do for you; who has raised herself to the position she always longed for—a woman with skill to scheme, and courage to carry out. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"And you agree?"

"I think not. I'm afraid it's impossible. I know it's not an argument that will weigh with you at all, or that, perhaps, you will be able to understand; but, you see, my word is pledged to this young lady."

"Is that all? I should think some means might be found to compensate the young lady for her loss."

Walter Joyce's face was growing very dark, but Marian did not perceive it.

"No, it is not all," he said coldly; "the thing would be impossible, even if that reason did not exist."

She saw that her shaft had missed its mark, but she was determined to bring him down, so tried another.

"Ah, Walter," she said, "do you answer me like this? In memory of the dear old days——"

"Stop!" he cried, bringing his hand down heavily on the writing-table before him, and springing to his feet. "Stop!" he cried, in a voice very different from the cold polite tone in which he had hitherto spoken; "don't name

those times, or what passed in them, for in your mouth such allusions would be almost blasphemy. Marian Creswell—and the mere fact that I have to call you by that name ought to have told you what would be my answer to your proposition before you came here—perhaps if I were starving I might take an alms of you, but under no other circumstance would I touch a farthing of that money which you pride yourself on having secured. You must have been strangely forgetful when you talked to me, as you did just now, of having 'raised yourself to the position you always longed for,' and of having 'skill to scheme and courage to carry out' what you desire. You forgot, surely, that in those words you told me—what I knew before, by the way—that you longed for your present position while you were my promised wife; and that you were bringing your skill and your courage to work to obtain it, while I was striving, and hoping, and slaving for you."

"We had better put an end to this interview," said Marian, attempting to rise. "Ah, Walter, spare me!"

"Spare you!" he cried in unaltered tones. "Did you spare me while all this was going on? Did you spare me when"—he opened a drawer at his side and took out a folded paper—"when you wrote me this cruel letter, blasting my hopes and driving me to despair, and almost to madness? Spare you! Who have you spared? Did you spare those girls, the nieces of the kindly old man whom you married, or, because they were in your way, did not have them turned out of his house, their natural home? Did you spare the old man himself when you saw him fretting against the step which you had compelled him to take? Who have you spared, whom have you not overridden, in your reckless career of avarice and ambition?"

She sat cowed and trembling for a moment, then raised her head and looked at him with flashing eyes.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Joyce," she said in a

very hard voice, that came clipping out between her tight lips,—"I am much obliged to you for permitting me to be present at a private rehearsal of one of your speeches. It was very good, and does you great credit. You have decidedly improved since I saw you on the platform at Brocksopp. Your style is perhaps a little turgid, a little bombastic, but that doubtless is in accordance with the taste of those of whose sentiments you are the chosen and the popular exponent. I must ask you to see me to the cab at the door. I am unaccustomed to London, and have no footman with me. Thanks!" And she walked out of the door which he had opened for her, and preceded him down the staircase, with a volcano raging in her breast, but with the most perfect outward composure.

See the curtain now about to drop on this little drama, —comedy of manners rather,—where nothing or no one has been in extremes; where the virtuous people have not been wholly virtuous; and where the wickedest have had far less carmine and tinsel than the author has on former occasions found a necessity to use. There is no need to "dress" the characters with military precision in a straight line; for there is no "tag" to be spoken, no set speech to be delivered; and, moreover, the characters are all dispersed.

Gertrude and her husband are in their seaside home, happy in each other and their children. Walter and his wife are very happy, too, in their quiet way. He has not made any wonderful position for himself as yet; but he is doing well, and is well thought of by his party. Dr. Osborne has retired from practice; but most of the Helmingham and Brocksopp folk are going on much in their usual way.

And Marian Creswell? The woman with the peaked face and the scanty hair turning gray, who is seldom at her own house, but appears suddenly at Brighton, Bath,

Cheltenham, or Torquay, and disappears as suddenly, is Marian Creswell. The chosen quarry of impostors and sycophants, she has not one single friend in whom to confide, one creature to care for her. She is alone with her wealth, which is merely a burden to her, and has not the power of affording her the smallest gratification.

THE END.

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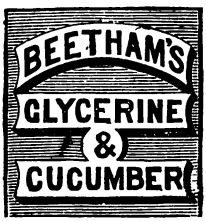

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